

Chapter Twenty-Three

Caesar addressed his own men like this: 'My friends, we have already overcome the worst...today will settle everything. Neither by inviting them to do what is right nor by obliging them, have I succeeded in changing their minds. As you go out to battle, pull down your ramparts...so that...the enemy will see that necessity compels us to make our quarters in their camp.'

When Pompeius saw this he understood their act... He groaned inwardly to think that he and his men were about to fight hand-to-hand with wild beasts...But there was no going back now, as things were on a razor edge.

Caesar's men, sweeping through Pompeius army...unable to resist...the most tremendous carnage ensued. ...This was the result of the famous battle of Pharsalus.

Appian
The Civil Wars
(circa 167 AD)

Even at idle, over a hundred meters behind him, the rumbling steel armada vibrated the air with dire warnings of a coming nemesis. A recent cadet, Fritz confirmed his insight on arriving; he wasn't qualified for this mission. Having just arrived, he had been put in command of a platoon of grenadiers in support of the lead panzer units.

His anxiety had been increasing since hustled off his train in Belgorod, the end of the line. Thrown on the back of a supply truck, he rode north through ruptured, charred earth strewn with mechanical destruction of incredible proportions as a continuous distant thundering grew louder. At the division HQ, he reported to a harried Colonel bent over a map table beneath heavy camouflage netting who nodded at Fritz while issuing orders, mechanically passed on by men wired into a bank of field radios. The Colonel gave Fritz's orders a quick scan and with another nod, Fritz was in a halftrack heading north to report to a

battalion commander. As his latest wounds were patched, he assigned Fritz to the leading units because, “You’re the only officer left available. Do what Sergeant Venner tells you. Welcome to Russia, Lieutenant! Carry the *fuck* on.”

This wasn’t how the manual described checking into your first duty station, but he had sworn an oath, it was his country, right or wrong. Moving up to the front line, he was only now learning about dread. The training manuals hadn’t described that either.

His shock only increased as he was escorted through rumbling machines to the tip of the spear. Metal-ripped, bent-plate panzers and metal-torn halftracks, were crewed by men with the cold merciless stare of reptiles. “Stay low and between those guide stakes! The boss is on that mound up ahead,” his escort shouted over the rumbling vibration before disappearing in the tall grass.

Only ten feet away before seeing him, the *kampfgruppe* commander in a leopard camo poncho, binoculars focused west, caught Fritz’s attention in a low calm voice. “On all fours from there.” Crawling up to him, the commander looked at Fritz and in that moment he knew the dread of power of relentless integrity to authority. Fritz understood with terrible clarity—this was the apex of the tip of the spear.

“I’ve already briefed Venner. Here’s the situation,” Danzig began. “See those roofs about six-hundred meters up ahead? That’s our first objective, *Greznoe*. You have sloping terrain to there, continuing on the other side of the village to the *Solotinka River*, with a grove in between them. Objective two—with *Greznoe* secure, we attack through it and take the heavy bridge over the *Solotinka*. My panzers will then swing north to assault the village of *Krasnyi* and secure the only heavy bridge over the *Psel River* about ten clicks from here. Expect opposition from here forward. Ivan’s 3rd Mechanized Corps is directly ahead and augmented by the remains of the 52nd Guards Division and the 31st Tank Corps.” Noting his, ‘deer in the headlights’ look, Danzig slowed his brief.

“Our attack frontage is that road, two-hundred meters north,” he said with a slight pointing motion, “running to the

southern edge of Greznoe. Elements of the III/5th is south of us. They will anchor the southern end of the village.”

In a low sweeping motion Danzig pointed north to a distant range of rolling hills. “That’s the shit! Ivan’s got heavy guns ranged up there north of the Psel. Air and artillery is scheduled but don’t go north of the road until the guns are neutralized. Your unit is the third echelon. When the Solotinka Bridge is taken, you will hold it and be prepared for a counterattack on my command.”

“Why aren’t the Russians hitting us now?”

Danzig turned with a smile one soldier reserves for another. “Think we’re going to walk into Greznoe? Ivan’s all around us, we’re too close for their artillery. Our engineers are twenty meters up ahead, clearing their minefield.” Fritz jolted lower to the ground. He hadn’t even seen the Germans to his front, *What else was out there*, he thought.

Danzig turned back west and raised his hand just above the tall grass. With a slight wave of his fingers forward, Fritz was stunned to see hardened killers, dressed in leopard camo, carrying submachine guns, pistols, grenades, knives and pick axes, rise around him, crouching low, silently stalking forward. Danzig saw his shock, whispering, “Stay away from those guys. If anything comes up, let Sergeant Venner handle them. They’re not keen on new officers.” His look told Danzig everything and he clasped his shoulder. “Stay by the radio. Listen for my commands and keep close to Sergeant Venner,” Danzig said confidently. “You’ve got good men, you’ll do fine. Bring them back, soldier.”

Only a radioman moved up to their position as Danzig checked his watch, frozen as if in countdown. “Shall I go back to my unit, Sir,” Fritz asked.

“Stay here. Everybody’s comin’ to us,” Danzig replied, focused on his watch. The seconds in the rumbling vibration seemed an hour before Danzig took the radio headset.

“Spider! Spider! Spider! Anvil-seven. Start the music. Fire plan—Foxtrot!” With Danzig’s short burst finished, Fritz thought surely this was the sound of the world ending. The

officer training manuals hadn't mentioned anything about that either.

The earsplitting shriek rose like a screaming vengeful goddess ripping the sky to shreds. As his mind numbing fright cleared, thick smoke flew overhead speeding for the village to his front. Burying his face in the dirt, he calmed himself, realizing the screaming cadence was from the four *Panzerwerfers*, SPW-251 halftracks each carrying six 280mm rockets strapped to their sides. The panzerwerfers, ranged about seventy-five meters behind him, were sending their hundred-sixty pound warheads smashing into the village in a rain of thunderous explosions, obliterating vision in a wall of smoke and fire, alerting the Russians in Greznoe. It's started.

The shrieking salvos seemed to last hours in the twenty seconds it took as multiple whirling whooshes above him roared up from the south, whistling north, followed by distant thunderous concussions. The 210mm howitzers, miles south of him, were hammering the hills north of the Psel with their two-hundred-forty pound shells. *Nobody could live through this barrage*, Fritz thought, watching explosions erupting on Greznoe.

He'd soon learn the manuals were wrong about that too as he suddenly felt the roaring, clanking vibration shaking his whole body. Turning to look behind him, the wall of steel monsters grinding toward him appeared through the haze of rocket smoke as destruction incarnate. The flashes of terror and panic from the madness around him turned Fritz to Danzig prone next to him, calmly scanning their front with his binoculars.

As a Tiger rolled forward, Fritz feared it would run over them. But, as if controlled by a single force, the lead of the panzer wedge stopped ten feet from them. Danzig gave Fritz a quick confident nod and jumping up, stripped off his poncho, rolling it up as he leaped onto the tank, swinging himself into the top hatch. Quickly strapping on throat mike and headset, he raised his fist high in the air, pumping twice before waving forward. The roar of the Maybach engines and clanking screech of the panzer wedge filled Fritz with fearful dread and inexpressible awe.

But Fritz had completed basic training and now had a responsibility. He swallowed his fear amongst the shocking chaos swirling about him. *What the fuck am I doing here?!* he asked himself. *You swore an oath*, his ego shouted back. Only now did his brain whisper from the ancient sea. *It is not about your oath, foolish child. It's about who you give your oath to.*



“Anvil-seven. Nail-one. Check your fire. Shift to fire plan Bravo!”

“Anvil-seven copy. Shifting to fire plan Bravo.”

Launching the attack on codeword ‘Spider,’ Danzig shifted the pre-planned artillery fire to further targets and laying smoke on the far northern hills. With head just above the Tiger’s cupola he scanned the front of his panzer wedge grinding forward, now a hundred meters closer to the village and still no response from Ivan. The fact only increased his caution. *What are they planning?* he thought. *What are they waiting for?* The booming whoosh of a 76mm antitank round smashed into a Tiger to his right, tearing pieces off it, but not penetrating the heavy tank’s armor. The savage contact almost a relief. *So it begins*, Danzig flashed, pressing his throat mike.

“Gun! One o’clock at three-hundred. Frag.”

“Standby!” Danzig’s gunner, Borse, yelled. Wurtzer, the driver, stopped, stabilizing the gun. Borse was the best gunner in the unit but although the 88mm main gun could fire on the move, hitting something from a moving tank was always a dicey proposition at three-hundred meters. “Round away!” Borse screamed in shattering recoil, rocking the tank backwards, as the tank instantly propelled forward. Veterans know standing still in a firefight is dicey for survival. Danzig watched the little rise in the terrain disappear in an explosion of flame and dirt. Unsure if it was a direct hit, he knew the high explosive fragmentation round of the 88 was like horseshoes and hand grenades. Close counted.

The air came alive in zip-cracks of Russian anti-tank and machine guns. Danzig slammed the hatch shut, as sharp pings

from the 14.7mm antitank rifles ricocheted off his tank. The 14.7mm was harmless to a Tiger but could turn his grenadier's halftracks into Swiss cheese. The sudden multiple blasts of cannon caught his instant attention.

"That clump of bushes at 10 o'clock! All Nails fire at will!" Four panzers fired as one. The salvo of roaring devastation threw metal chunks and bodies into the air, showering the area with dirt clods and body parts.

"Wedge accelerate! Keep it tight!" The three Tigers and the four low turretless StuIII assault guns of the panzer wedge gunned forward, engines roaring in plumes of diesel exhaust and gray cordite haze charging into a head-high cornfield.

Wurtzer saw Ivan's foxhole before anyone else from his driver viewport. The tiger shifted, running over them as they stoically continued firing their anti-tank rifle as Danzig heard the screaming Russians over the roaring engines and cannon fire. Suddenly to his left, a Tiger to his left was hit low with a smashing explosion sending large chunks of its right track bursting into the air.

"Nail-two's hit! Nail-two's hit! I can't see 'em in this shit!"

"Roger, Two," Danzig replied mechanically. "Nail-one shifting south." On his reply the tiger shifted twenty degrees left, as the unseen gun fired again at Nail-two, smashing its hull machine gun into a stump of twisted metal. The Ivans were veteran anti-tank marksmen.

Danzig's Tiger charged forward as Otto, the radioman fired the hull machinegun to Wurtzer's right. The Russian gun crew, realizing it was over, vanished in the corn, abandoning the 45mm anti-tank gun. Otto's hull MG 42 sprayed the area as the Tiger ran over the gun, turning it to crushed metal scrap. Ten feet from the smoking, pummeled Nail-two, Danzig halted, popping his hatch as stormers stalked by in pursuit. The air was thick with acid aroma of scorched metal, diesel fumes, and cordite. Two's right front track and boggy had disintegrated; its part in this attack was over. As Two's commander opened his hatch, Danzig yelled his technical diagnosis over the cascading roars of engines, cannon and small arms.

“You’re fucked! Get a recovery crew out here and haul clear of the battle zone.”

Two’s commander gave a quick thumbs up as Danzig yelled down at Wurtzer, “GO!” The tank churned dirt and cornstalks in roaring acceleration, as he scanned his panzers charge. Looking behind him, the three smoke billows graphically informed that Nail-two wasn’t the only victim of Ivan’s hunter-killer teams. Russians hidden in the cornfield had let his lead Tigers pass to fire their 45mm at the lighter tanks.

Ivan had learned. The 45mm could knock a track off, or wreck a gun, but little else to the heavily armored Tiger. But at close range against the lighter PzIVs and IIIs, it was a crew killer. *Sprannggg*. The sniper’s bullet struck his hatch a foot away, denting it. No further warning required, he slammed the hatch shut as his tiger blew through the cornfield onto a dirt road. Greznoe lay two hundred meters ahead, with waist-high grass between the smoking village and the road.

“Nail-eleven! Fill in Two’s wedge position!” Danzig commanded. “All Nails. Close formation. Stand ready to assault village. Stormmers up!” His panzers cleared the cornfield in seconds. Danzig called “Panzers forward!” The wedge traversed the road and an invisible line of death as the gates of Hell burst open with a horrific roar.

A battery of 76mm anti-tank guns fired at once. Ten laser-red streaks smashed into the six tanks of Danzig’s wedge. Multiple hits tore chunks of metal from tanks in shattering impact. The Tigers survived the impacts but were pockmarked with fist size metal divots. Most of StuIIIs survived due to their low silhouette with gashes of ripped metal along their tops but one was out of commission. Struck in the command hatch copula, the shell had ripped it away, along with the head and shoulders of the commander. The crew, all momentarily deaf from the impact, now awash in draining entrails were stunned in their silent personal void of horror beyond human endurance.

With the first salvo of anti-tank guns the Russians let loose a dozen 82mm mortars, pre-sighted for the road. Shrapnel whizzed and ricocheted, slicing into grenadiers huddled behind the tanks and moving into the tall grass, driving them back into

the cornfield in instinctual flight to safety. A dozen more mortars then fired, pre-sighted on the edge of the cornfield, graphically demonstrating the protective value of cornstalks to metal shrapnel. Bloody chaos. Terror. Attack faltering in human frailty to the unbearable. Danzig could feel it without analysis. Analysis useless now. Die! Or release the demon. The terrible dragon. The battle madness. "Fire! Fire! Forward! Kill them ALLL!" Danzig screamed over the net.

Fear and shock turned to bestial rage. The roar of seven tanks sent explosions of wood and fire high into the air as the first row of huts in Greznoe disintegrated. Only three Russian 76mms returned fire through the dust and smoke as the enraged steel monsters charged at full throttle, their crews growling in demonic fury, all guns firing. Another volley and the guns were silenced as the stormmers, furious in methamphetamine frenzy, charged after the tanks with inhuman screams.

All guns firing, the panzer wedge drove head long into the burning rubble at full speed. No commands needed, the attack beyond command now. Only left-right directions to Wurtzer transmitted by Danzig was heeded as Borse sighted and fired the 88, with murderous destruction his only goal. All lost in the fusion of animal savagery with machine, locked in the battle madness of mechanical war, the Germans rally.

"Second wave! In!" Danzig transmitted. From the cornfield, the PzIVs and IIIs burst through the hailstorm of mortars, the halftracks tucked in close behind carrying the grenadiers, braced with silent prayers or grim blankness to the chaos about them.

The wedge hit the burning rubble of the houses, machineguns blazing into the next row of huts to their front. The StuIIIs, without a turret, spin to face down both sides of the road, their guns ripping into the Russians trying to pull back from their breached first line. Beyond terror and fear, both sides react in instinct of survival as the Russians rally, releasing their own demons.

Four bleeding Russians push a 45mm, one wheel gone, through the rubble of the burning hut, manually sighting it less than fifteen feet from the StuIII broadside. Firing point blank, the penetrating round ignites its ammo. The instant expansion of

pressurized fire blew the Stu's hatches open as the inferno spewed flames with blowtorch intensity. The commander, half blown out of the cupola hatch, burnt like a ghastly wick in the inferno beneath him.

The Russians abandon the gun, dragging a bleeding brother across the road as their comrades in the southern end of the village start dashing across the dirt road in groups of three and four. Danzig can see them crossing but must focus to his front, seeking real threats to his objective. *Fuck! Where is Three-Five?!*

"Venner! Venner! Nail-one," Danzig calls. "Get 3-5 up on this net!" He knows that elements of the third battalion, fifth regiment is somewhere south of them. They must join up or Ivan will counterattack in the gap and swing in behind him. "Nail-four, Nail-four! Take yours south!" he commands over crashing recoil of cannon and mortar blasts bursting about him.

"Four's gone," the only reply.

The integrity of command, a clear head amongst deafening chaos. The burning Stu, fifty feet away with the smell of burning flesh permeating his tank, decisions were made in real time. Mourn later. Hesitate and die. *Five's senior but too new. Six is steady.*

"Six! Take'em south, secure left flank."

The integrity to focus. The sergeant tank commander of Nail-six accepts his instant promotion to tank squad commander without hesitation. "Roger, One. Five and Eight. On me!" Decision to follow without question. Three tanks spin hard left, rushing south behind Danzig.

Madness in bestial wrath leaps out of the tall grass as mortar blasts roll down the open field. Inhuman killers tear into the Russian's shattered first line. The stormmers charging the rubble with subs blazing, dying and killing at pointblank in frenzied rage. Blood scent and burning flesh drives savages on both sides to murderous new heights. Dazed wounded and crawling are hacked to pieces. No quarter, no mercy for only monsters rule in Hell.

“Nail-one. Nail-seven. We’re in behind you with escort.” The next wedge of four PzIIIs and six PzIVs crush over burning rubble, escorting four halftracks.

“Roger, Seven,” Danzig replied. “Follow us in. Stay off the roads. Spike-two, Spike-two! Deploy one, the rest tighten up behind us.”

“Roger, Nail-one. Spike-two, out.”

Greznoc, like most farming villages, is made of wood and the Germans had learned using a village alleys or roads was a set-up for an ambush. The safest way to the next row of huts was through them. Danzig’s tanks smashed forward through the next row, bursting upon a smoking desolation of the third line of huts across a dirt road. *Too quiet*, Danzig analyzes. Not for long.

A halftrack pulls onto the road as grenadiers dismount over the sides, moving toward the last row. Death flashes as the machinegun, camouflaged underneath a cabin down the street, opens up. Six Germans are hit at thigh level, their legs chopped off as they fall in screaming agony. The PzIII, pointing down the road, puts a 50mm round into the machinegun nest. Focused on the nest, it didn’t see the charging T-34 speed around the corner. It spins, firing its 76mm with a sniper’s accuracy on the fly, thirty meters away.

The German tank explodes in catastrophic eruption, blowing its turret ten feet in the air and smashing onto the halftrack, crushing it on impact. “Panzers! Hard left!” Two more T-34s speed around the corner firing simultaneously.

Danzig’s spinning tank is hit with a glancing blow that shatters the spare track sections mounted on his turret for extra protection, rocking the 57 ton Tiger like a hobbyhorse. Borse aims low. Instant analysis—*frag round loaded*. A hull shot will stun the T-34 even if it doesn’t penetrate the armor. Fusion of mind with weapon seamlessly in a veterans expertise in destruction.

“Anti-tank! Gimme antitank!” Borse yells at the loader, as the frag round impact crushes the T-34 hull in a fiery head-on collision. The next two charging through the smoking hulk are shadowy targets for the two 88mms and four 75mms. The

Russians are shot to pieces in screaming eruptions of fire and metal.

“All Nails west! Blow through!” Danzig transmits, switching to the intercom, “Wurtzer. Get us outta this lane.” The Tiger spins right, taking half a house with it. “Nails. Halt!” Danzig commands, his tank inside of the remainder of a hut, but it's not right. The grove between them and their next objective, the Solotinka Bridge, has been cut back. A clear field of fire for what's ahead of them. Glancing at his watch, the analysis begins in fusion of discipline. *If it feels wrong, it is.* Monsters can go mad, but command demands discipline in madness. Danzig calculates the algebra of life and death in real time.

Sixteen minutes into attack. Four hundred meters to bridge. Not right! Ivan's second line still unknown. Three-five lagging. Gap opening left flank. Third-mech hasn't shown itself. We're outnumbered and strung out to cornfield. They aren't hitting us with arty. Must be close! Open field is killing ground. They're rallying for counterattack. Waiting for us to rush ahead. Position here. Take it, then attack to bridge. They won't blow it while their armor's on this side of river.

The brain's calculation turns to voiced commands seamlessly. “All Nails! Nail-one. Hold position. Ready for counterattack. Third echelon! Up! Stay east of village. Smoke your position. Keep northern high ground blind. Six! Watch the south flank.”

Danzig's commands are rapidly answered in cadence of mechanical efficiency as the platoon leaders acknowledge: “Three.” “Six.” “Nine.” “One-two.” “One-five.” The curt responses of combat veterans is followed by a hesitant “Uh...Third echelon acknowledges and will comply.” *Unfamiliar voice. The new guy, Danzig grasps. Venner needs to counsel him on combat comm. This ain't a fucking training exercise.*

“Venner. Nail-one. What luck Three-five?”

“No joy, Nail-one!” The instant reply. “Sent runner.”

“One, copy.” What can be done has been done, further discussion pointless.

“I need ten-feet,” Borse yells up to Danzig. Danzig’s foot lightly taps Wurtzer’s middle back, understanding the why instantly as they roll forward. The Tiger’s main gun is clear of the house now with a full field of view. Wurtzer had heard Borse, but the ship’s captain is in command. Suddenly Danzig realized the Soviet mortars have stopped as the unfamiliar vibration of high pitched engines gets louder.

The four staggered Russian IL-2 tankbusters, flying so low they appear like lightning bolts shot from the trees roar above them as the ground erupts in bursts of 37mm cannon and rockets before any could react. The Earth is churned in a screaming wave of fury and death washing over them. The front line got the least of it as they flashed by, but from village to cornfield the aircraft sewed lines of exploding earth, leaving a field of mangled bodies and burning halftracks, streaking by so fast no fire was returned.

Garbled transmissions and cries for medics flood the airwaves. A calm stern voice clears the net, “All Nails. Nail-Actual. Help inbound.” A General knows when to speak, and what to say.

Everyone braces for another pass. Suddenly at sixty feet, a jinking IL-2 flying north to south with a German Me109 fighter on its tail pounding it with its 20mm cannon, appears and disappears in a flash of tracers, fiery smoke and roaring engines across Danzig’s field of view. No relief. The Russian mortar barrage is back with intensity. *Here it comes*, Danzig’s last human thought, as brain fuses with his command seamlessly.

T-34s charge from the grove in two waves of ten, roaring at full throttle, guns blazing spewing smoke and cordite flashes. “Fire at will,” Danzig calls as five T-34s in the front line disappear in orange-red eruptions. *KA-Whamm*. Danzig is slammed back in his seat from the frightful blow echoing inside the tank as metal flakes and dust swirl in fetid sweat and gun exhaust. Borse’s return sends the shooter careening in smoke and flames. The Germans, in stable defilade, accurately smash most of the first wave and some of the second before the T-34s rush at full throttle into the village. Air thick with seared flesh and blood as tanks lock horns in hand-to-hand combat, spinning

and firing point blank in a swirling roar of screeching tracks and thunderous eruptions. The troops, like ants amongst warring titans, scatter in frenzied effort to avoid being crushed by friend or foe in the blind mayhem. The Russian troops sprinting behind their tanks reach the village and the savage chaos swells.

Industrial Age war—primal instincts. Hell manifests on earth in mechanical savagery in the reality of cliché, “Boots on the Ground.” Clichés are meaningless in Hell.

Although Danzig can traverse the turret, even fire the gun from his command cupola, there is no time. “Hard Right!” “Spin left!” “Back-Back-Back! Left!” Each command obeyed instantly as the well honed crew becomes part of the machine. Borse fires at each of Wurtzer’s reactive jolts and twists of the Tiger. Moving shadows in haze fill his optical gunsight in blinding explosion. Danzig, scanning his view ports needs a good crew as he has more to worry about than just himself.

“Three! Behind you!”...“Eight! Your five o’clock!...“Spike-two! Counter north. Ivans moving into field northeast.” Tracers fly in all directions as men fight hand-to-hand with pistols, grenades, and knives. Smoke from fires blind all in the roaring inferno as the chaos suddenly lulls. The survivors flash in fatal thought, *I’m alive! Who won?*

As fast as they appeared, they’re gone. “All Nails. Nail-one. Reform and count off.” Tanks retake positions as Danzig listens to the count, “Nail-three. Got two mules, one bull, one crate.” Third platoon has two PzIIIs, one PzIV and one StuIII. “Nail-six. Up with three bulls.” “Nail-nine...” All Ivan’s radio intercept teams listening in know is that there are bulls, mules and crates out there. Danzig counts his guns as they reform at the edge of the village, recalculating the equations of life and death with new variables. *Twelve effectives left. Escort scattered. Still no artillery—they’re close. This side of river. They’re reforming. Must take the bridge.*

“All Nails. Nail-one. Hold position,” Danzig transmits. “All Spikes. Deploy on line. Venner! Reform east of village, prepare to mount.” Danzig’s veterans understand the code instantly. *They’re coming again. Take it—then it’s our turn.*

Fritz, fighting to hold sanity in numbed terror and panic, can only look at Sergeant Venner in pleading confusion. “We stay here,” Venner replies to his stunned silence. “The boss will tell us when to move. He’s gonna go for the bridge.”

“Nail-one. Six. Three-five arriving.” *About time*, Danzig thinks, replying, “One, copy.” Danzig spots troops moving into open field to his left front. *Fuck!!*

“Venner! What luck, Three-five!”

“Sent another runner.” The burden of command.

Danzig watches the troops moving to their death. Their officer without tactical awareness of the situation, is sending his men into the bear’s jaws. The burden of integrity to responsibility. “I’m Out!” Danzig yells, “Borse in command.”

The Russians know integrity too. As Danzig rises from the hatch, the booming stutter of the burp gun crosses the top of his Tiger. The Russian, lying in smoking rafters of the remaining walls, cuts loose. As Danzig swings back into the turret, a bullet slices his rear shoulder as another ricochets into the turret. The bullet buzzes into pieces until it finds the only soft thing within the turret, human tissue. Borse gets a couple pieces in the thigh and Hermann, the loader, one in the chest. Not fatal, just searing pain and blood.

The volley of small arms is followed by a shouting, “Nail-clear!” Danzig takes a quick peek and is instantly down again. He’s been here before. His next jump is out and running hard south. Switching over to the lane between the first and second burning rows of debris he finds a group of teenage soldiers, huddled around a radio as if it might protect them. Most bleeding, all with the face of broken men, praying for a “pull-back” command. The young age quickly in Hell.

It’s not their fault, Danzig knows, thinking, *Their commanding officer lacks leadership and is without situational awareness.*

“Where’s the CO?” He commands. Several point ahead, as Danzig points at a medic and radioman, “You’re on me,” he says, sprinting ahead to finally be in contact with III/5’s commanding officer. Training manuals don’t speak of post-graduate work in Hell.

“Get your men back—NOW!”

The CO, cautiously watching his men advancing over open terrain, jolts at the roaring nemesis behind him. Hesitating in shock, he watches Danzig draw his boot knife. Primal fear of widened eyes, turn confused, as Danzig sinks it into a burning wood post. “But the Russians are retreating?! I’m in contact,” he stammers in reply.

Another fucking new guy. Danzig grasps. He knows the manuals don’t teach much about reality in combat. Schoolbook solutions are for school, not for Hell’s dynamic.

“You idiot! Russians don’t retreat. They’re regrouping for a counterattack. Why do ya think we’re not being hit with artillery right now!” Danzig roars, turning to a sergeant huddling with his squad, next up to move forward. “Sergeant! Get those men back! Go!”

No questions on the change of command as the sergeant shouts in relief, “Yes, Sir!”

“I...I did what...ordered. Sorry.”

“Sorry don’t mean shit! You’ve got the whole left flank strung out. Ivan will roll us up if this side caves. You’re in command! Get your head out of your ass, wake up to what’s around you and lead!”

The radioman and medic catch up. Danzig grabs the headset, as he dials in the right frequency. “Venner. Nail-one. Radio check on bravo-three-five net.”

“Five by five, Nail-one.” Venner’s reply is answered quickly by Danzig, “Standby for bravo-three actual.” Danzig hands the CO the headset. “This is the voice of god! Stay on the radio and listen up for your orders.” The lesson in reality over, Danzig turns to the medic, pulling his jacket up and over his wound, streaming blood at each heart beat.

“Got any sulfa, doc?” Danzig asks, pulling his knife from the burning post. As the medic digs in his bag, pulling a packet out, Danzig hands him the knife. “Slap the knife to that and put some sulfa on it.” The smoke from the wound elicits only a low desperate growl. Slipping the jacket back in place, the group stared at the demonic nemesis, shocked and hesitant, as the

sudden roar of hundreds of voices overawes them in primal fear, *UUURRRHAAA!*

“They’re coming!” The nemesis yells, turning to the young CO. “You will hold here! Not one step back. Stand or die!” Danzig turned and sprinted north.

Danzig could hear his tanks firing as he sprints back. The Russian mortar barrage rolls toward Greznoe. Ivan’s readjusting his fire. Soviet doctrine considers friendly casualties in an attack an acceptable loss. The Russians won’t lift the barrage until they are inside the village. As he climbs into his turret he sees waves of Russians running out of the orchard straight for them. “Nail-one is back up. Hold line! No retreat!”

Human waves of screaming Russians charging forward with their bloodcurdling roar invokes ancient primal memories of a stampeding herd of maddened buffalo charging you. Relentless, unstoppable force. Germans fire all weapons into the masses of charging men. Waves of soldiers crumble as the stampeding roar rushes forward. Russian tanks burst from the grove, firing all guns on the move.

“Borse. Take the tanks!” Danzig’s command lost in crushing recoil of the 88.

“Anti-tank,” Borse yells. Give me all antitank now!” Hermann, the loader, mechanically responds.

The charging Russians pay a terrible toll as they close the distance. Russian tanks charging at full speed run over their own dead and wounded. An anti-tank round flies through the still standing side of the house next to Danzig, exiting the other side of the building in crashing shriek. Danzig slams the hatch shut.

The catastrophic explosion to Danzig right turns him as a PzIV vanishes in a ball of fire, annihilating its crew and any troops nearby. Simultaneously, another earth shattering explosion sends a debris mound flying into the air with the troops behind it vanishing. Another horrendous concussion blinds him in shock. Something hit the remains of the house which disappeared in a stunning concussion that feels like a punch to the jaw.

As smoke clears he sees the four behemoths at the edge of the grove. The Kursk battle was the first time the Germans met

the *Zvierboi*. Modeled on the StuIII, the *Zvierboi* stood over ten feet high, its massive, heavily armored turretless hull armed with a 152mm cannon. It's official designation, SU-152, was the Russian answer to the German Tiger and Panther. Ivan called it, the *Zvierboi*, Russian for 'animal hunter.'

The four Russian giants stop at the grove edge firing at the German line and a PzIII goes up in flames. "What the fuck is that?!!" a stunned voice blasts over the net.

Danzig isn't sure, but knows it must die before they do. "All Nails—All Nails. Fire priority on those things at the edge of the orchard." A command he instantly realizes harder than it looks seeing a direct hit on a SU-152 bounce off harmlessly as its 152mm shell hits in front of rubble, sliding into a pile of debris with a tremendous explosion, sending blood red mist and dirt clouds flying into the air.

"Round Away!" Borse screams in the recoil. The 88mm strikes a giant high in the front, sending chunks of metal in the air but still firing on the Germans.

"I hit it. I hit it!" Borse screams, "It bounced off!"

"Hit it harder!" Danzig screams back, further discussion pointless as the Russian troops reach the German line. There is no panic in the bloody chaos, no time to think, both sides veterans and implacable enemies. Killing hand-to-hand, tearing at each other's faces, as eyes are gouged out and throats ripped. Instinctive survival as all trace of humanity is lost in animal savagery. Only quick flashes of pain and terror are conscious.

German machineguns displace to the second debris row firing in all directions, strays hitting friend and foe as others protect the gun crews from charging Russians. Another German tank explodes farther to Danzig's right. An SU-152 goes up in flames from a Tiger's 88. *It can be killed!* Danzig thinks, as Borse yells "Round Away!" Danzig sees another SU-152 hit, high center shattering its internal gun mount, its cannon swinging upward, as smoke pours from it. The titan doesn't explode but starts backing into the orchard. No time to think, T-34s move into the village on Danzig's left.

"Nail-six. Tanks entering town to your right! Attack vector north." Nail-six's reply lost in recoil blast of Danzig's gun as

Borse screams in triumph, Danzig refocuses on the grove, as the SU-152 burns. The last *Zvierboi* starts backing up from its position, still firing. *Time running out.* Discipline in madness—the mission is the bridge. Cascading thunderous explosions to his left as the T-34s spin toward him, exposing their rears to the charging tanks of Nail-six. The Russians die before they know it's happened, fuel-air explosions sending troops rolling in the concussion waves bursting eardrums as eyes bleed from ruptured veins.

“All Nails!” Danzig transmits, “Panzers forward! Venner! UP! Tuck into wedge.”

Fritz can only stare in fright as Venner roars “Mount-Up!” and troops leap into his halftrack. They accelerate through the still hand-to-hand fighting in the inferno of Greznoe, shock and panic gripping in the chaos. Attacked by mortars and aircraft since it began, the savagery and the smell of death overwhelms him amongst the mangled, burned and crushed bodies. As they traverse the killing field, Fritz unconsciously releases his bladder. No one says a thing as the veterans near Fritz remember well their first time. There are no training manuals for Hell.

Smoke clings to the trees in the grove like a fog as Danzig's tanks accelerate through it, machine guns blazing into the haze. Danzig spots the empty mortar pits, *Hurry! They're withdrawing!* A race for time now. Must take the bridge before they blow it.

The wedge crashes through the grove. Another road with scrub brush and trees sloping down to muddy banks of the thirty foot wide Solotinka. The earth-shaking explosion turns Danzig north as plumes of water geysers blossom over the trees about a hundred feet north of him. *Nooo!* “AAHHAAaaggg!” His raging scream of futility echoed in the tank before transmitting, “All Nails! To the right flank. On me!”

His tank spins right down the road and the far bank comes into view from the scrub and trees along the river as Danzig grasps the reality instantly. The bridge is gone, now smoking piles of rubble. It's all for naught. The Germans aren't going to take Krasnyi; they aren't going to take the heavy bridge on the Psel River or cross the last major natural obstacle to Kursk. The

Germans aren't going any further today. It's all for naught. The Russians have won in the blood sacrifice and horrific cost to relentless integrity.

As a PzIII pulls up to Danzig's Tiger, it's struck from an anti-tank gun hidden on the far bank. It burns on the road as the survivors bail out. Futile rage turns to savage intent. "Take them out!" Danzig roars as Borse's shot screams across in crushing impact.

"Venner! Nail-one. Deploy at bridgehead! Stay in the trees," He commands, pulling out his map, covered with penciled grid coordinates. "Anvil-seven. Nail-one fire-mission. Grid Two. Three-zero-niner-niner-four-six. Suppression fire. Keep it west of river."

Within seconds Anvil-seven replies. "Roger Nail-one. Grid two-three-zero-niner-niner-four-six. Stay west." The grid checks, Danzig turns to other matters.

"Nail-Actual! Nail-one. Frequency shift—'Picker.' Shifting now." Danzig contacts HQ on the new frequency before the Russians can find it to pass the news.

"Nail-Actual. Nail-one. Enemy clear of east bank. Bridge is gone. Ivan heavies north of Psel cannot engage with direct fire. Expect barrage as they withdraw. We can't stay here. Need infantry to establish west bridgehead. No vehicles can cross. Need engineers ASAP. Anticipate nine hours before crossing."

"Roger Nail-one," the general replies calmly. "Two-five is moving up. Say state."

"Sustained heavy casualties. Request immediate resupply and evacuation of wounded."

"Roger, Nail-one. Pull back command east of Greznoe when relieved by Two-five. Medics in Greznoe now."

"Roger, Actual. Nail-one. Out"

The shrill whistling warns as the far bank churns in deafening concussions. The barrage rolls toward the river bank as a 105mm sends a geyser of water and mud spewing over Danzig's tank.

"Anvil-seven! Anvil-seven! Check your fire! Too fucking close!" Danzig roars in misplaced rage. Death comes from all sides in Hell. Focus, or die.

“Uh...roger Nail-one. Checking fire.”

With the Second battalion of the Fifth grenadier regiment in place, Danzig moves his unit back to their start line. Immediately moving through them, he checks his survivors, most sprawled next to their vehicles where they had collapsed on arrival. Little conversation and no commands except to the supply teams to hustle food and water for his men. He came to Venner and Fritz last. Venner reported, then pointed at the cigarette dangling from Danzig’s mouth.

“Got another one, Chief?” Venner asks in exhaustion as Danzig tosses him the pack. Shakily pulling one from it, Venner offered one to Fritz, sitting next to him who suddenly awakens from stunned numbness. Fritz takes a drag of his first cigarette in his life.

“We made it,” Fritz whispers. “We’re here... We’re here.”

“Good work, soldier,” Danzig said, looking at Venner who nodded in answer to his unasked question, *He’s alright. He’ll make it.*

Danzig crouched down, grasping Fritz’s shoulder, gazing at him with firm confident compassion, nodding as Fritz repeated, “We made it, Sir... We’re here.”

Fritz had learned the reality of the political spin, ‘Boots on the Ground.’ He knew now that such spin is meaningless irrelevant in hell. “We made it, Sir... We’re here.”



“We’re here, Sir. We’ve arrived.”

The gentle shake of his shoulders, popped Kirk Danner’s eyes wide. The smiling hostess of the GMG jet met his gaze with a smile. “We’re here,” she repeated calmly.

Danner sat up, instantly aware, feeling the jet’s smooth descent as he looked out the window. The rolling forested mountains of Bavaria gliding by on their approach into Munich International seemed so familiar that Danner lost himself, searching vast archives of memory for a clue to his familiarity. The hostess smiled at him comfortingly.

“Beautiful isn’t it? I wanted to be sure you were awake for our approach,” she said. “You slept your way across Europe. It was the sleep of the dead,” she smilingly added.

“No,” Danner said quietly, “Still here. Not dead yet...Not yet. I’ve unfinished business to attend to.”

Danner’s polite whisper would have been forgotten by most. But the hostess was a trained intelligence officer. She picked up his whisper’s finality with skill far above most in contemporary society could fathom.

She shuddered in the warning. She knew dread when she heard it.