

ACHTUNG! PANZERWAFFE!

A novel of the Second World War

(that's the one with Hitler and Spitfires...)



by

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Whilst I have always had a keen interest in military history and - within the limits of decency - many brave warriors. I am indebted to the kind gentleman of the Southbourne Tabletop & Boardgamers, and Wessex Wyverns, wargames clubs for their input and assistance concerning technical matters pertaining to the Second World war era, and for their 'wargaming' a suitable plot.

Epilogue

May, 1945 – and POW camp just outside the north German town of Basingstadt.

"For you, Fritz, the war is over!" the British corporal joked as he checked Hauptmann Hans Schmidt's papers.

"Perhaps not for you, *mien Englischer kamerad*?" Hans amused back. "You still have zer Japanese to fight".

"Blimey Chalky! He's right!" the Tommy's pal grinned.

"Cheeky bugger!" the corporal noticed someone had already 'confiscated' the Jerry Captain's wristwatch. "Right, Schmidt. You'll be interviewed and processed".

Hans wondered what that might *mean*... was simply glad *not* to have been captured by the Russians. "I was never a Nazi party member", he informed.

"You tell that to Captain Darcy, Chum", the corporal remained unimpressed. "Through there!"

"*Danke*", resigned to his fate Hans went in the direction gestured. Entering the room he found two guards, and a seated British officer and (female) WRAC, ready to take notes.

"*Herr Hauptmann!*" he promptly stood to attention and saluted.

"Please sit down, *Hauptmann*", carefully appraising Fitzwilliam Darcy offered his opposite number a cigarette, which the German eagerly took. "I have your pay book here. Quite impressive?"

"Thank you".

"Party member?"

"Never", Hans was honest, noticed the WRAC take careful notes. She appeared to have the rank of Lieutenant.

"We'll check that, of course. You made it all through the war?"

"I was lucky. Many of us were not. On both sides, *nien*?"

"Quite so", Fitzwilliam appraised. "Any plans for after the war?"

"My home in Berlin was bombed out. Along with my family", Hans wondered if they'd check that too. "I was a professional soldier. Now, I am thinking, I will need to find a new trade".

"*Dein Englisch ist sehr gut?*"

"*Wie ist dein Deutsch?*"

"Goes with the job", Darcy amused. "So, *Hauptmann*, let's begin at the beginning, shall we?"

Chapter One

"Lieutenant", finding the aloof British WRAC officer there first... Hans saluted. Never one for the 'German salute' this came easy.

"Please sit down, *Hauptmann*", she replied with mild disdain – the duty guard stock still, like a statue. "Captain Darcy will be along shortly to continue your interrogation".

"May I smoke?" he wished to respect her authority.

"You *may*".

"You would like?" Hans offered one from his meagre ration.

"I don't smoke. Thank you", politeness mattering to the British she then added an afterthought.

"*Kamard?*" he offered one to the guard.

"Not allowed on duty, Chum", he gently responded.

"Ah! Sorry, delay..." Captain Darcy then entered. "We've good reason to believe you are who you claim to be. Your story checks-out *Hauptmann*", he sat down opposite, pipe in hand. "Mother, father, fiancé, sister... All lost in an air raid?"

"There are no winners in war", Hans agreed.

"Yet you are my prisoner?"

"*Acht*, so..." Hans' attention was interrupted by the WRAC Lieutenant suddenly standing.

"Permission to be excused, Sir", she seemed highly *emotional*.

"Granted!" Fitzwilliam accepted as the young woman left. "She, er, lost her family in an air-raid too", he noticed the German purse his brow in thought. "Her fiancé at Singapore".

"I am sorry. For *all* deaths".

"She'll be back shortly... no doubt".

He seemed so certain Hans suspected a ruse to get him to open up. Maybe?

"Assuming we confirm you as a non-Nazi...", the Captain continued, "what do you plan to do for a living?"

"I have no idea", Hans admitted, just as the WRAC returned. She appeared to have been crying, but was now 'collected'. Out of respect for her sense of sensibility, he stood up and politely bowed.

"Ok, *Hauptmann*", Darcy noted the act of empathic courtesy. "I believe we were discussing Normandy..?"

Normandy, June 1944, and Hans Schmidt was yet again thrown into the fray. In his beloved Tiger tank '131', he and his crew were assigned help a rather fed-up Whermacht company hold the village of Ville D'Aston. No doubt the Tommies will have their usual air and artillery superiority. No matter! Perhaps – as his 'Nazi' driver Franz Landser claims – the Luftwaffe is simply awaiting their moment. That Hans has heard nothing from his *Schatz*, Helga, in Berlin, he needed to put to the back of his mind as he conferred with the infantry *Hauptmann* about the dispositions.

"I will be better with my Tiger in the village", he suggested. "Centrally". The *Hauptmann* shrugged that was 'Ok'.

"*Achtung! Tommie kommen!*"

'Here we go again', Hans thought as he prepared for action...

General Sir John Lowe has come forward to see his troops capture the hamlet of Ville D'Aston. He was also keen to see how his nephew, Captain Peter Lowe, leading 'C' Company Borchesters, would fare. Some nonsense of the lad's mother - and his own wife Lady Sybil - about some 'unsuitable liaison' with a Spanish refugee nurse. Stuff and nonsense! Any *gel* nursing wounded chaps and harbouring a hatred of Nazis was good enough in Sir John's book...

Whoever the Jerry commander was he was sited well. Nothing obvious – though the woods either side of the main road looked like they deserved a good stonk. "Smith!" he ordered his RAF liaison. "Any chance you Brylcream Boys can rustle us up a Typhonn of two?"

"I'll see what I can do, Sir", Norman Mancunian accent promised...

"*Gotten Himmel!*" Stug commander Manfred Beckenbauer saw Tommie Shermans approach. "*Feuer!*" he commanded his platoon – and within seconds an enemy tank burst into flames...

'So that's where Jerry is...' Captain Peter 'Pete' Lowe noticed his chaps – 'C' Company, 1st Borchesters – advance behind cover towards the village – as their accompanying Shermans and Fireflies scooted for cover and hull-down positions. Suddenly there was a scream in the sky and RAF Typhoons –

summoned from the 'cab rank' above – screeched in to strike the wood where the enemy Stugs had fired from – the Shermans also shooting back.

"Blimey Mr Lowe Sir!" 'Chopper' Harris articulated. "I'd wager there's loads more Jerries hidden out there..."

"Mm", Peter considered. "Bring up the weapons platoon. Let's give that wood on our left a pasting. No point in having a dog and barking yourself..."

"*****sse!" Beckenbauer exclaimed as his platoon suffered under the rocket air attack. "Where is the *Luftwaffe*!" he knew cursing the absent airforce was futile. "*Feuer unt rasen!*" he ordered his surviving vehicles to 'shoot and scoot' – on his left say the solitary Tiger damage an enemy Sherman; and the infantry mortar open-up upon the advancing Tommies...

With pride General Lowe watched his nephew's infantry rush forward up the road – the Borchester's Vickers MG's and 3" mortar stonk and clear a wood from which the Jerries had fired back with little effect...

"*Verdammt!*" Hans noted the platoon on his right withdraw from their pasting in the wood – on his left Beckenbauer's Stugs recklessly push forward. Time to fall-back? The Whermacht infantry thought so...

"*Ruckzug* – retreat!" he ordered... only 131 refused to start. "Landser?" he demanded. The driver tried again – and this time 131 fired up. On his right a 75mm AT gun took out another Sherman, but with the Tommie artillery having their range and their infantry advancing... it was time again to live to fight another day in this war Hans now knew Germany couldn't – and *shouldn't* - win...

"*Shouldn't*, *Hauptmann*?" Darcy noted.

"You will hear many say they did not know of the atrocities. We all did. We just didn't *want to know*. Doubt meant we could keep silent and save our own lives. To speak out under Hitler meant death for one's family".

"Easy for you to say that now?" the WRAC stenographer spoke up.

Out of turn? "Lieutenant Bennett has a point?" Fitzwilliam calmly suggested.

"Agreed", Hans shrugged. "But I must look forward, *nien*? I have no family left, no job. Perhaps I might somehow atone for the sins of my people?"

O

Trauma? It was difficult to forget the Great Patriotic War and move on...

March 1943. “What’s he saying?” Commissar Alexi Yakob did not himself speak German.

Luckily his deputy, Olga Gromeko *did*. “He says we are Commissars and that there are SS in this area. They will shoot any Commissars without trial. He says we must change into these soldiers uniforms to be taken prisoner by his men...”

The German tank commander spoke again. “He says”, Olga continued, “that he believes all should be accorded treatment by the correct rules of war”.

“Not a Nazi?” Alexi postulated.

“Apparently not. I’d say a bourgeois soldier”.

“We do as he says”, Alexi agreed. “Remember his face when the day of vengeance comes”, he looked forward to the *rasplata*; the ‘reckoning’...

“And you’re sure it’s him?” Lieutenant Elizabeth Bennett, WRAC, again checked her ‘Soviet sister’s’ testimony.

“It is”, Olga confirmed. “To our knowledge he is not a war criminal. Just a soldier in the fascist cause. You may release him”.

“I will inform Captain Darcy”, fluent in five languages Elizabeth agreed in Russian a plan of action.

“May I talk to him?” Olga heard herself ask.

“Under supervision, yes”, Elizabeth agreed – nodding to the guard showed them into the cell where Schmidt was being held.

“You do not remember me, do you Schmidt?” Olga spoke to the prisoner in his native German.

“Should I?” Hans’ guard went immediately up – his heart pounding he was to be handed over to the Soviets.

“Perhaps. Livotko? March 1943? I was your prisoner. In those days I was a Commissar. You took me prisoner?”

“Vaguely”, Hans trawled his memory. “You escaped?”

“I and my comrades were rescued behind your lines by partisans, yes. But for your... *honour*... we would have been, in all probability, killed out of hand”.

“I am – *was* - a soldier”, Hans shrugged. “Not a murderer”.

“A ‘good German’?” Elizabeth chipped-in the current *euphemism*.

“I would like to think so, yes...” Hans’ mind cast back to 1943, and to the doomed *Operation Zitadelle*...

Hans scanned the horizon from the turret of his new Panzer VI Tiger tank, number 131. It was clear Ivan had set up his defences in depth; had concealed them well. Mines? Anti-tank guns? Fanatical infantry? It would be like *Fall Bleu* all over again. *Tratsch* – ‘gossip’ - had it General Von Schliecher knew

this offensive to be crazy. But after Stalingrad who any more had faith in the High Command’s ‘wisdom’?

“Today’s objective is to get to the horizon”, he informed his crew as – to his right a company of Panzer IVs moved off for the start of the attack. Suddenly there was a terrific explosion and a wood before the ‘*Rotbarts*’ erupted in flame and debris. A good start? The artillery had just pummelled into scrap a nest of SU85 tank hunters. ‘*Lucky Rotbarts*’, thought Hans...

“Their main attack is to our left – their secondary to our left”, the Commissar spoke. General Ivan Ulanov knew the Political Officer had a habit of stating the obvious in order to appear useful... but he let it pass. With his guns failing to engage the advancing Hanomag half-tracks on his right... it was a dismal start. Yes, Stalingrad had been a victory, but training was still sparse. Recruits conscripted and thrown into battle far too quickly. At least the Fritzes were doing the obvious, even if some idiot had placed those SUs too far forward, within their artillery range...

“*Scheisse!*” Hans cursed the coms failure – no orders to advance and no sign of ‘*die alte mensch*’ to direct as – ahead of him – the new Panther tanks thundered passed up the road, towards the ‘Y’ junction where – he guessed – Ivan’s infantry was dug-in. This time the artillery fire was ineffective, their forward observer forced to take cover from enemy fire. Then – finally – the Stukas showed up. At least the *Luftwaffe* still had air superiority – and Hans saw a brace of the enemy’s hated T34s brew-up. His sweetheart, Helga, had written that allied bombing was increasing back home. Hans wondered if that explained the lack of *Luftwaffe* fighters these days...

In the meantime he saw the *Rotbarts* finally disentangle from a small wood and advance, artillery fire pin enemy infantry at the junction, the Panzer grenadiers start to take casualties as their thinly armoured Hanomags took fire. No doubt they’d soon dismount to attack on foot; slow things down to assure their own salvation...

“Orders to move!” his radio operator finally reported they were ‘on’...

“Always the easy target!” Ulanov hastily issued orders for corrective action. He wanted his tanks on his left – against the enemy armoured thrust – not chasing Fritzish infantry... but for now their assault was committed – at least sending the Fritzes back somewhat. Carnage? If he failed he knew the Commissar would gleefully report him to the NKVD, and he too would be ‘purged’...

“Caution – it’s a new tank!” Hans urged a stealthy advance up the road the aid the withdrawing Panzer Grenadiers. “*Blodsinn!*” he exclaimed as – concealed in a tree-line – his Tiger 131’s huge 88mm missed a T34. At least he’d drawn the enemy’s attention from the breakthrough the Panthers and *Rotbarts* were making on the right...

“*Okonchatel'no!*” Ulanov relieved as the T34s finally gave up chasing Fritz infantry to attack the flank of the main enemy armoured attack to his left...

“*Mist!*” Hans swore again as another shell broke up on a T34’s hull. “Remind me to talk to the factory people”, he bet they were made in Paris by disgruntled and occupied *Franzmanner*. At least the main attack was brushing aside and shooting-up some Soviet T70s as they continued their ‘death ride’. Yes, victory? But could Germany afford such attrition? Indeed, the final enemy gun-line was firing back – and wasted the reckless Panther’s but hitting their thinner side armour.

“Got him!” this time gunner Kurt Rugel reported they’d at least bailed a T34.

“Not going through”, Hans complained again as the *Rotbarts* made the objective. Was it worth the carnage and losses? Ivan could afford these far easier than could Germany...

“*Vorwrts!*” the General raced past in his *Kubelwagen* jeep.

“You heard *die alte mensch* he ordered his driver move Tiger 131 forward...

And then? And then he was back in 1945, and still a prisoner of the allies.

The Soviet officers were conferring with their British counterparts.

“Schmidt. Our Red Army colleagues agree you are not a Nazi”, Elizabeth addressed the prisoner.

“What will you do if you are released?” the Russian woman shot him a question.

“I have considered helping refugees”, Hans shrugged. “All I have left is my brain and my brawn. And a desire to help build a better world from the ashes of the old”.

“A good answer”, she considered. “The Soviet Union has no interest in *this* German for war crimes”, Olga informed her Tommie *tovarishch*...

Chapter Two

It was now high summer, 1945. *Mutter Natur* was claiming back the rubble of Basingstadt. Aching for his exertions clearing the debris of war to construct

new housing... Hans Schmidt took a break... when a British staff car pulled up. It was driven by the comely Lieutenant Bennett... and contained the ubiquitous 'Captain' Darcy.

They came over.

"You have made Major?" he cheekily greeted the British officer.

"Congratulations. So, you have discovered that I was secretly best man at *der Fuhrer's* wedding?"

"You have recovered your sense of humour Herr Schmidt, *good*", Darcy grinned (his po-faced driver – like Queen Victoria - not *amused*). "How would you like to earn a little extra cash?" he offered Hans a (rare) cigarette.

"I would like that very much", Hans gratefully took it. "I save for later" (for him, in the barracks, it was 'currency' he could trade for food).

"We're collating information on the war. You served on most fronts. We'd appreciate your reports and analysis".

"Are you going to fight the Russians after the Japanese?" Hans smirked – saw their reaction. "I read the newspapers".

"Not as far as I know", Darcy was sanguine. "I think we've all had enough of *that*. It's historical research. Mostly... You'll be paid for your time, and it won't interfere with your work here?"

"Then, yes", Hans could see no strings attached.

"Excellent! Report tonight to the camp at 19:30".

"*Herr Hauptmann*", instinct and training made Hans salute before he could stop himself...

O

The English historian he met that evening was called Professor Richmond. "You will excuse me my German is imperfect being", he spoke haltingly.

"You prefer we speak English?" Hans offered.

"No. My German improve it must. For my research. May I introduce my assistant, *Frauline* Goldberg. She is an undergraduate researcher, your fellow countryperson".

Hans regarded the blonde, blue-eyed young woman. Her name spoke volumes. "My family escaped to England in 1937", she simultaneously said both *everything* and *nothing*.

"I understand", Hans wasn't sure what else to say. "I assume you worked for British Intelligence during the war?"

"That's classified", she drew a shorthand pad and pencil.

"Tell us about the French 1940 campaign, please?" the academic requested.

Hans' mind wandered... then focused on a dark page. It was June, and *Fall Rot*, the invasion of the main part of France was about to begin.

"After Dunkirk my tank company was assigned to the bridgehead over the Somme at Abbebois", he began to relate. "I was acting commander following *Oberleutnant* Schindler's wounding. We were unprepared for the ferocity of the French attack..."

Early June, 1940. "It's too small", General Von Schliecher complained of the bridgehead. "We need to expand it. I don't like my back to the River. But... supplies and the footslogging infantry are taking time to come up. Your panzers are all very fast, Schmidt. But we need supply trucks too..."

As if on cue a column of Opel Blitz trucks arrived. "*Die Franzosen kommen!*" someone meanwhile shouted. "*Mit Panzern!*"

'Hopefully not those Char B things', Hans wondered if his Panzer IVs would be up to the job. In minutes he led his column of tanks across the bridge, past a deployed battery of 88mm guns and infantry preparing to expand the lodgement. But – unlike back in the Ardennes – the French had learnt a thing or two – and their reaction was rapid. Horses strained at their traces as a battery of the infamous rapid-fire 75mm '*Soixante-Quinze*' guns loomed over the horizon - deployed and opened-up on the still preparing '88s'. As they exploded under accurate fire General Von Schliecher was forced to take cover under the bridge.

And then the first French tanks appeared. "*Gotten Himmel! Char B's!*" Hans exclaimed his worst nightmare made flesh and steel – but was pleased to see his own artillery home-in on them. Yet, when the smoke cleared, the enemy armour looked unperturbed. 'Where is our support!' thought Hans as – unlike in the Propaganda Ministry's films – a Stuka attack damaged but didn't destroy the deployed enemy 75s. Worse, their infantry were swarming forward with all the *elan* of his father's war...

"Zer ground is wrong here!" Klopp complained his failure was due to others. "My men are tired from too many fixtures!"

"The *Fuhrer* will have none of that..." someone amused.

"Fire!" Hans gave the order to turn left and engage the Char's as the supporting German infantry were decimated by concentrated and focused artillery fire. 'The God of War is not with us today...' Hans mused as his Panzer IVs proved ineffective against the Chars – on the other flank a platoon of Panzer IIs getting a pasting from some Samoas. "Pull back! Cover the bridge!" he ordered his tanks as the unleashed *poilus* stormed the bridge – wounding and capturing General Von Schliecher. "All tanks – destroy your vehicles!" Hans ordered, knew surrender now his only option in a huge tactical defeat...

"How long were you a prisoner?" the historian asked.

"Not long", Hans grinned wolfishly. "If the Frenchies had been able to repeat that success all along the front they would have lasted longer. They fought bravely. But their command and control was ineffective. It discouraged initiative. But, the General later told me, their catering was good..."

"You take pride in what you did?" the *Frauline* asked.

"Professional pride", Hans admitted. "Unlike many in our army I fought an honourable war".

"Not my army", she reposted. "I am no longer a German citizen".

"You intend to go to Palestine?" Hans asked.

"Uh-hum", Professor Richmond intervened. "We're not here to discuss *politics*. Were you released with the armistice, or did you escape?"

"Once the bridge fell back into French hands a counter-attack was launched", Hans recalled. "I was able to slip away and swim the river. The French blew the bridge as our forces crossed further north..."

O

London, June 6th 1940. The hospital was full of wounded, just back from Dunkirk. Back too from the 'front'... was Lieutenant Peter Lowe of the Dorsetshire Regiment, who made his way to the ward office.

"Yes?" the Matron's tone was that of a female Sgt. Major.

"Is Nurse Gracia-Ibanez on duty?" Peter asked of his Spanish sweetheart.

"No", came the surly reply.

"And?"

"Not in yet".

"Thank you – I'll wait", the Lieutenant decided to slip outside for a fag.

'Huh!' thought the Matron. 'So that's her *beau*, is it? Ruddy Spaniards – coming over here to escape Franco. Nursing for us is one thing. But walking-out with *our* young men..? Ought not to be allowed...'

"Von Schliecher's messed-up his crossing", General Von Totenhosen enjoyed a moment of professional superiority. "We will not do the same. Let the Frenchies expend themselves on futile counter-attacks. Have everyone dig in. Falkenhelm!" he called for his *Luftwaffe* liaison. "Can your people target those tanks?"

"We will do what we can", the *flieger* promised.

"Peter!" Julia Gracia-Ibanez gasped her surprise as she arrived at St Kylie's Hospital, hard by Blackfriars station; still two hours to blackout.

"Julia!" taking her hands he replied. "I only have a few minutes – then I have to get a train and report back to my unit. But I just *had* to see you".

"Where?" she alarmed this would mean a return to France.

"I can't say", Peter knew secrecy must be maintained. "Walls have ears. But I will write again when I can", he pressed a letter into her hand. "Stay safe".

"I have my gas mask", she showed him her case to secret it in – unlike many young women was *not* using it as a surrogate handbag. "And I know the way to the shelter".

"Of course..."

"I must go – or my hispanophobe Matron will have me slopping bed-pans".

"Of course", the dashing young Lieutenant smiled... then stepped back. "I too. *Adios*", this being a public place he blew her a kiss.

"I... I love you!" Julia blurted.

"I know", Peter replied, smiled - and with a wave dashed for the fast train back down to Kent...

O

France. The Somme River. Near Boisement. "The river is only fordable at low tide", fresh from his victory upstream General Lacoste ordered. "Attack now – high tide - and drive them back into the water!"

"Air support?" Duran wondered.

"The airforce will do what they can", Lacoste sighed. "And the English have promised us some fighters from Britain".

Duran raised a curious eyebrow. "The English will keep their word", the General hoped. "I do not believe this 'run away at Dunkirk' myth..."

"*Oui*", Duran saluted and set about issuing the necessary orders...

O

"It is not a *panzer's* job to defend", Peter Schaffer grumbled.

"Until the bulk of the infantry come up that if what we must do", his commander Horst Gruber was sanguine.

Yet tales of 37mm shells from *Panzer IIIs* like his bouncing-off French tanks were doing the rounds. *Gerucht* said the best way to stop them was to get their fuel bowsers. If they couldn't move they could be ignored. *And* he was vaguely aware of things going wrong down south...

"*Die Franzosen kommen!*" someone meanwhile shouted. "*Mit Panzern!*"

"*Schieser!*" hastily stubbing out his therapeutic cigarette Horst clambered up into his 'little tank'...

Thus far, Pierre Dubois noted, the German artillery fire was proving singularly ineffective. He did not expect this to last. Indeed, next to him a battery of deployed *‘Soixante-Quinze’* came under fire. His company commander gave the order to advance. As a reservist Pierre knew his duty... if not all the necessary skills. But it was fight now or France would be lost.

To fight now?

Maybe to *die* now...

Above his head Horst saw fighters whirl – both German and enemy. French or British? He knew not. He only hoped the *Luftwaffe* would keep them away from him and his column of tanks – a scratch unit of Panzer IIs and Panzer IIIs. His latest orders said to advance up the road south; to meet the French attack head-on. To expand the bridgehead. Behind him the infantry too were advancing, Von Totenhosen having clearly decided that the best means of defence was attack.

And then the first of this Panzer IIIs exploded into flame. “Smoke!” he hastily called into the radio for first aid...

If the woods to their front had been secured... Pierre was dismayed to see the Germans occupy their village on the road towards Paris; to his left French tanks trying to get around the Germans to the river, undetected. At least the enemy airforce seemed to be elsewhere today – both side artillery pummelling each other into mutually assured destruction...

But holding the *Bosch* was not the same as pushing them back to Germany...

Things were now going from bad to worse. The forward observer was killed, his *kubelwagen* a smoking ruin. Worse, one of the vital 88mm flak guns – used increasingly these days in an anti-tank role – had been silenced.

And then the French tanks appeared. Powerful, heavily-armoured, Char B’s. Hit on its side armour... Horst’s ‘little tank’ exploded in a sheet of flame. “Bail out!” he ordered his crew - saw he was wounded (but not badly). Diving for cover in a ditch by the side of the road he saw the French artillery open up on the town – the nearby *Wehrmacht* infantry passing through to assault the enemy on the overlooking rise. They said the French could not afford the losses. But could Germany?

It was time to make his way back to the bridgehead...

“Send in the reserves!” Lacoste determined to reinforce success...

As Horst manoeuvred rearwards it got worse and worse. Several Opel ‘Blitz’ lorries exploded in flame – their infantry contents scrambling to safety

where they could. Where was the *Luftwaffe*? Where were the Stukas? It looked like – as up river - the end was in sight...

“*Sacre bleu!*” Lacoste exclaimed.

“*Mon General?*” Duran requested.

Lacoste thrust the paper at him. Further south the line was giving way. In the moment of victory he had been *thwarted*. “Issue the necessary orders”, he sighed. “Pull back all we have left. We still have all our tanks. We must try now to save Paris...”

There had been a miracle in 1914?

Could there be one again?

Chapter Three

With the tensions between the former allies rising... Hans found himself once again up for interrogation by the quasi-sinister Captain Darcy.

“Thank you”, he was greeted in a surprisingly friendly way. “Today... could you tell us about your time on the Russian Front?”

“What would you like to know”, Hans found himself unexpectedly disappointed that the charming Lieutenant Bennett wasn’t present.

“Ah!” Darcy exclaimed as the door opened... and in stepped an American officer. “My counterpart at SHAPE¹”, he introduced. “Captain Cohen”.

“Captain”, Hans acknowledged – guessed the rumours were true about the allies falling out. “The Eastern Front? Hans recalled – notice the Americans had one of those new-fangled tape recorders.

“We wanna know how the Russkies fight. Operationally”, the American demanded as he lit a cigarette and passed one to Hans.

“*Danke*”, he took it with all alacrity, a quality ‘smoke’ a rare thing in post-war Germany. “Operation Typhoon, November 1941. The drive on Moscow. They knew little, but were starting to learn. We were...”

...tasked with helping hold a Soviet counterattack... Hans drove across rutted dirt roads into a village call Malen'kiy Stalingrad, which translated as ‘Little Stalingrad’. An amusing name? He promptly reported to Colonel Von Totenhosen – the General’s brother - it clear the forces in the village had dug-in, ready.

¹ SHAPE = ‘Supreme headquarters Allied Powers Europe’. Western powers HQ.

"We have little armour here", the Colonel rubbed his hands against the growing cold. "A few Stugs and some Marders. Sort 'em into order. Ivan will be here soon", he spoke as fresh Soviet shells screamed over.

"*Javol!*" Hans saluted... and looked up at the sky. Low cloud. No *Luftwaffe* support. But, also, no Russkie planes...

"*Achtung! Ivan kommt!*" the word passed through the lines. Rushing to the front positions in the village, Hans saw that which he most dreaded. T34's! The new Russian tank that outclassed any German vehicle. Worse, for AT all they had were a few old 7.5cm field guns. "*Scheisse!*" he quietly cursed as the firing began. It was like the Char B's in France all over again...

But maybe not? The Soviet attack seemed focused upon outlying snipers and observers. Ivan was learning... but maybe not fast enough to save his capital?

Even better the feared T34s were doing little...

"Tank support?" Sergi questioned why they were going in alone.

"Over there, Comrade!" the Political Officer explained both everything and nothing as he drew his pistol. Sergi took the hint and – with the rest of his platoon – advanced across the hillock to suppress and kill the enemy snipers and artillery observers... a second platoon advancing into the wood; aiming to liberate Malen'kiy Stalingrad, using maximum cover...

"They really don't like our snipers, do they?" a private called Kenwurdig joked as – overhead a defensive stonk went into a hill the Soviets were clearly using for observation.

"Let's get these Marders ready", Hans a little illusion about his *panzer* arm's ability to take on a whole clutch of T34s...

Carnage!

"Comrade Colonel!" a sergeant reported on the incoming fascist artillery 'stonk'. "Your Political Officer has been killed!"

"Sush a pity", Colonel Kenvorti fought to hide his glee. "We're wasting time – losing daylight! Order a general advance!" he saw one of his platoons had succeeded in breaking into the village.

As a *panzermann* Hans disliked infantry fights... but at least they had recaptured the village and repulsed the Soviet incursion with bloody loss. Thus far the exchange had been good. 'Thus far'... Only *now* the feared T34s were finally advancing. "*Feuer!*" he ordered the Stag 'assault guns' shoot... only to see their shots bounce off the thick Soviet armour. "*Folgen sie me!*" ('Follow me'!) he ordered his Marders prepare for a counterattack... the *fleischwolf* – 'meatgrinder' of the infantry fight for the village not his concern. At least the

artillery – and the replacement observer Totenhosen had sent – was breaking up the enemy attack across open country...

The fight went on. Ivan was firing his tanks halted, the better to hit the Stugs. One by one they were shot up...

And then it was all over – as if it had never happened!

"Looks like Ivan's given up!" Kenwurdig grinned. "*Goot*. Didn't fancy taking them on with these things", he yet affectionately patted his Marder.

"*Ja...*" Hans agreed... looked up... and saw it again looked like snow. Once again he was grateful for his sweetheart Helgas's foresight in sending him long underwear; her father having been in Russia in the last war, so knew what was needed out here in the wild east...

Chapter Four

June 2nd, 1940. "Mien Fuhrer!" SS *Obergruppenfuhrer* Sven Hummel proudly gave a most correct German salute.

Adolf Hitler looked at him wanly. "You too think it can be done?" he stated more than questioned.

"*Javol mien Fuhrer*. But only if we act now. Before the Tommies have time to prepare. And to concentrate their enormous fleet. Whilst also they also continue to send troops to a lost cause in France. We can surprise them by acting decisively. In small boats and canal *prahams*. The *panzers* are rested after Dunkirk. I say first England, then the rest of France, *ja*?"

"Raeder?" the Fuhrer now questioned his naval chief.

"It is now or never. I would prefer *never*. But... the *Obergruppenfuhrer's* staff work on tides and our logistical problems is excellent".

"My *Luftwaffe* has already crushed the enemy in Dunkirk", *Reichsmarshal* Hermann Goering now chipped-in. "The *Kanal* is but another twenty miles".

"We treat it as an extended river crossing", Sven pressed his advantage. "Just like the surprise on the Meuse a month ago. We requestion barges *prahams*. All we have to do is secure a beachhead and the English will be forced to negotiate. The *fallshamjager* paratroops are rested and ready. The English have no army left to oppose a landing".

The supreme gambler that was Adolf Hitler *considered*. His astrologer assured him the stars were indeed aligned. Yet 'unlucky 13'? No, he *was* on a winning streak...

"Fuhrer Directive 13", he ordered. "Immediate landings on the coast of England to force them to negotiate peace on terms favourable to the Reich".

"*Javol mien Fuhrer!*"

“No wireless traffic”, Hitler then added. “Canaris thinks the treacherous British might be reading our codes”.

“Javol mien Fuhrer!”

O

Summer, 1945. “I suppose wish to atone”, Hans was honest with the American Colonel

“Your military record says you fought an honourable war?” Cohen obliquely probed – like a gangster in a Hollywood movie.

“My country did *not*”, Hans was honest. “I have no family left. And I must do something with my life, must I not?”

“Mm”, the American studied the report. “British Military Intelligence seem to think you are no Nazi? Hell – even the Russkies cleared you”.

“I never joined the Nazi Party”, Hans shrugged. “Despite it being expedient. It limited my medal tally, but, so what?”

“You received the Seelowe clasp?” Ike Chohen’s eyes narrowed.

“Few of us did”, Hans recalled his voyages across the *Kanal*.

“Ok, tell me about *that*...”

June, 1940. Withdrawn from the front... Lieutenant Hans Schmidt read again the order. “Madness!” he exclaimed. “The Frenchies are not yet vanquished!”

“Orders!”, his superior *Hauptmann* Schnell shrugged. “Our Fuhrer is a gambler on a winning streak, I am thinking. And we are his chips, *nein?*”

Hans looked at him carefully – knowing such a remark could place him in trouble with the Gestapo. Of alike mind... he let it pass.

“I am not sure our Panzer IIIs can float?” the similarly withdrawn Horst Gruber was likewise laconically doubtful. “My little tank for sure will not like salty water”.

“They tell me surprise will be complete”, the *Hauptmann* continued, “that the English army is destroyed, and that the Stukas will again provide our artillery support...” Schnell reassured.

Himself, as much as anyone...

O

The reports of increased bombing of London were alarming. If his family were safe in the country... Lieutenant Peter Lowe of the Dorsetshire Regiment remaining concerned for his girl, Nurse Julia Gracia-Ibanez, on duty up in London...

“Walmington! Walmington-On-Sea!” shouted the porter. Packing up his troubles in his old kitbag Peter... made to alight at the small Kent resort. Duty calling, his mind turned back to his unit. Mauled on the retreat to Dunkirk and subsequent evacuation, the Borsetshires were refitting, prior to a return to France...

O

“You want us to cross The *Kanal* in that!” Hans looked at the converted *prahm* – a Rhine barge – in total shock.

“If the sea’s calm it should be alight...” the *Kriegsmarine* officer likewise seemed none too convinced.

“And the British airforce? Their huge navy?” Gruber alarmed.

The *KM* officer shrugged it wasn’t his ‘department’. “Reichsmarshal Goering says the *Luftwaffe* can handle them...”

“Like they stopped the Dunkirk evacuation?” Hans backed up his new *kamarad*.

“They say there is no English airforce in France now because they have so few planes”, the *KM* officer shrugged. “The war is over. They say Paris will fall by Tuesday”.

“I want a life-jacket”, Horst worried about the negative effects of saltwater on his little tank...

TO BE CONTINUED...