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## THE ENTRY OF THE ARMORED WARFARE OF THE RED ARMY INTO THE BREAKTHROUGH OF THE GERMAN FRONT IN THE NORTH OF MAZOVIA IN JANUARY 1945

### WEJŚCIE SIŁ PANCERNYCH ARMII CZERWONEJ W PRZEŁAMANIE NIEMIECKIEGO FRONTU NA TERENACH PÓŁNOCNEGO MAZOWSZA W STYCZNIU 1945 ROKU

The offensive operation of the Red Army against Wehrmacht in January 1945 took place on the section assigned to the 2nd Belorussian Front (2 FB)<sup>1</sup>, planned to reach as far as 250 km to the rear of the battle line. The Front started the offensive on 14 January 1945. It acted according to the plan, approved by the High Command in the directive of 28 November 1944<sup>2</sup>. The troops, under the command of the Soviet Union Marshal Konstanty Konstantynowicz Rokossowski<sup>3</sup>, were ordered to break through the fortified German lines by the Narew river and direct the main strike to Przasnysz, Mława and Lidzbark Welski. By the tenth day of the offensive, the troops were supposed to be on the line: Myszyniec – Nidzica – Działdowo – Bielsk – Płock. The role of the 2nd Belorussian Front was to support the main attack from the north, led to the areas between the Vistula and the Oder, as well as secure the right flank of the 1st Belorussian Front, commanded by Marshal Georgij Konstantynowicz Żukow<sup>4</sup>, heading for Berlin<sup>5</sup>.

#### **Operation Plan and Tasks of the Panzer Army**

The mission of the 5th Armored Guards Army (5 APancGw) as the strongest panzer formation of the 2nd Belorussian Front was tying down and driving off the

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<sup>1</sup> Actions on the frontline were described i.a. in: K. Sobczak, *Kierunek Bałtyk. Wyzwolenie polskich ziem północnych 1944–1945*. Warszawa 1978; E. Kosiarz, *Wyzwolenie Polski północnej 1945*. Gdynia 1967.

<sup>2</sup> *Директива Ставки ВГК № 220274 войскам 2-го Белорусского фронта, 28.11.44*, Центральный Архив Министерства Обороны Российской Федерации (hereafter: ЦАМО), фонд 148а, опись 3763, дело 103, pp. 277–278.

<sup>3</sup> A. Seaton, *Wojna totalna. Wehrmacht przeciw Armii Czerwonej 1941–1945*. Trans. P. Mikietyński. Kraków 2010, p. 803.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 818.

<sup>5</sup> A. Wasilewski, *Dzieło całego życia*. Trans. Cz. Czarnogórski. Warszawa 1976, p. 556.

German forces, which were standing in the way of the front's shock troops. Apart from tankers, the troops consisted of the 48th Army (48 A) and the 2nd Assault Group (2 AUd), attacking in the north-western direction towards Mława, Lidzbark, Iława and Malbork. The front staff officers' intention for the army commanded by Colonel General of armored warfare Wasilij Timofiejewicz Wolski<sup>6</sup> was to join the breakthrough of the line of resistance, when both supporting armies would be on the line Przasnysz – Ciechanów, that is 20-25 km deep in the German defense, which was expected to happen on the third day of the offensive. In post-war publications, the January offense actions of the 2nd Belorussian Front, with the 5th Armored Guards Army coming ahead of the front, were called the Mława–Elbląg Operation, and introducing rapid forces to the breakthrough was its component<sup>7</sup>.

The entry of armored warfare into the breakthrough of the opponent's defense was a proven maneuver during fights and it consisted in the fact that tankers, not participating in the fights for the front zone, were passing through it at the sector which had been captured and cleared by infantry units, and then they moved forward to the rear of enemy forces, often neither prepared for defense nor manned with army units<sup>8</sup>. In the discussed case, the details of the maneuver were not known until the last moment, because the task for the 5th Armored Guards Army was given directly while the troops were marching into the breach. Therefore, the army's staff had not worked out the attack on maps before, except for the predicted variant actions, in assumed territorial circumstances and unknown time of action<sup>9</sup>.

### **Panzer Army's Preparation for the Offensive**

By the command of the Red Army Commander-in-chief of 30 November 1944, passed on by cryptogram No.298111, the 5th Armored Guards Army was separated from the 1st Baltic Front, with which it participated in autumn fights<sup>10</sup>. The grouping consisted at that time of the 29th Panzer Corps (29 KPanc) and the 3rd Panzer Guard Corps (3 KPancGw) as well as – operating as an independent unit – the 47th Mechanized Brigade (47 BrZmech). The army was temporarily sent to the reserves of the Stavka of the High Command, with the order to change the place of the stopover from the region of the previous fights, the area of Możejki in what was then the Lithuanian Socialist Republic, to the region of Brańsk near

<sup>6</sup> ЦАМО, фонд 33, опись 686046, единица хранения 40, pp. 259–260.

<sup>7</sup> Mława–Elbląg Operation was presented i.a. in: K. Sobczak, *Wyzwolenie Warmii i Mazur w 1945 r.* Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie 1961, No. 1, pp. 3–20; M. Tarczyński, *Walki Armii Radzieckiej o wyzwolenie Warmii, Powiśla i Żuław.* Rocznik Elbląski 1979, Vol. 8, pp. 189–229.

<sup>8</sup> А. Радзиевский, *Танковый удар: танковая армия в наступательной операции фронта по опыту Великой Отечественной войны.* Москва 1977, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> В. Дайнес, *Танковые войска СССР. „Кавалерия” Второй Мировой,* Москва 2015, p. 128.

<sup>10</sup> Журнал боевых действий 5 гв. ТА с приложением копий боевых документов, ЦАМО, фонд 332, опись 4948, дело 387, pp. 1–2.

Białystok. After arriving in the region indicated in the command, the army fell under the command of the 2nd Belorussian Front commander<sup>11</sup>.

The 5th Armored Guards Army was transferred to the new region by rail. The troops started loading, beginning on 16 December 1944. The 6th Division of Anti-Aircraft Artillery (DAPlot) ensured the safety over the transport<sup>12</sup>. Between 20 and 31 December 1944, 28 echelons arrived at the unloading stations, and another 52 carriages gradually arrived at the place until 9 January 1945. The unloading area was located at the stations in Bielsk, Sokółka, Łosośnia, Grodno, Białystok, and for the rear of the army in Sadowne. As the trains were being unloaded, the troops were marching out to the region of concentration, near Brańsk, Rudka and Malinowo<sup>13</sup>.

In the new region, the army was given significant supplementation: 6708 people, including 5600 motorized infantry soldiers and 372 combat vehicles, with 332 from a new allocation and 50 after a general renovation<sup>14</sup>. Thus, there was little time to prepare for military operations. The front headquarters expected that at short notice the vehicles with marginal hours of exploitation would be restored to efficiency and that newly acquired soldiers would be instantly trained and the ranks would be closed, particularly in terms of preparing the subdivisions for performing military operations and the ability to operate the assigned devices, as well as strenuous political and propaganda work with the recruits<sup>15</sup>.

The moment the offensive began, Wolski's army included 585 tanks and self-propelled guns<sup>16</sup>. Over a half of the regular machines were treated as a complementation and already in the last days before the attack the 25th Armored Brigade (25 BrPanc) received 24 new tanks, and the 32nd Armored Brigade was given 15 machines<sup>17</sup>. Many medium T-34/85 tanks had therefore not run-in engines. Despite the efforts, the majority of the machinery were not new vehicles but the ones with problems in keeping them in motion or freshly-renovated and untested<sup>18</sup>. In some armored battalions, self-propelled guns were introduced for service instead of tanks. That was the case even with the strongest 31st Armored Brigade, which had fifty T-34 tanks, but half of the strength of the 2nd battalion was needed to be complemented with ten self-propelled guns SU-76. In each of the three brigades of

<sup>11</sup> 3 KPancGw. was then separated from the army and it was transferred to another place. Ibidem, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Оперативная сводка штаба 5 гв. ТА 13.1.45*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Журнал боевых действий 5 гв. ТА...*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> И. Кулан, *История и боевой путь 29-го Знаменского ордена Ленина Краснознамённого ордена Суворова II степени танкового корпуса*. Минск 2010, pp. 91–92.

<sup>16</sup> Ф. Галкин, *Танки возвращаются в бой*. Москва 1964, pp. 214–215.

<sup>17</sup> *Журнал боевых действий 29 тк*, 30.09.1944 – 9.05.1945, ЦАМО, фонд 3420, опись 1, дело 25, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> Ф. Галкин, *op. cit.*, pp. 243–245.

the 10th Panzer Corps tanks barely constituted half of the machinery. The third of the independent combat groupings, the 47th Mechanized Brigade, had 35 American vehicles M4A2 *General Sherman* from the 18th tank regiment (18 pcz). The 14th separated guard regiment of heavy tanks (14 pczc) owned 29 machines of *Joseph Stalin* JS-122 type. Self-propelled artillery units, supporting the incomplete tank brigades, presented an entire variety of guns, usually in the number of regular 21 pieces per regiment – from the light SU-76, through SU-85, SU-100, SU-122, to the heaviest ISU-152<sup>19</sup>.

### **German Grouping before the Panzer Army Front**

The reconnaissance made by scouts of the Soviet grouping gathered intelligence data at short notice and prepared detailed reports informing that before the army's line and on its flanks – in the regions of Dąbrówka, Maków, Pułtusk – of total width of 33 km, there were three divisions of German infantry defending themselves<sup>20</sup>. On the line Dąbrówka – the Orzyc river, on the 10th km, there was the 299th Infantry Division with the 475th battalion of sappers. They were supported by the 209th Brigade of Assault Guns (BrDzSzturm), the 1st Artillery Regiment (part), two artillery divisions and the subdivisions of the 57th mortar regiment (pm). The sector from the Orzyc river to Głodowo, of a similar width, was occupied by the 7th Infantry Division with the 80th engineer battalion, reinforced by the 185th Brigade of Assault Guns, the 63rd Artillery Regiment, two artillery divisions and mortars from the 57th regiment. The line Głodowo – Pułtusk was held by the 5th People's Grenadier Division with the 745th sapper-engineer battalion, supported by the 2nd division of the 47th Artillery Regiment, the additional 316th and 603rd artillery divisions and some of the mortars from the above-mentioned regiment. In total, Germans had 24 infantry battalions and eight battalions of other specializations on this line. At the front positions there was half of those forces. According to war statistics, an average defense line was 2,1 km of a front per battalion, and on every km there were – including the reserves – from 440 to 550 people, from 44 to 67 light and heavy machine guns, from six to eight mortars<sup>21</sup>.

From the German mobile reserves of the 2nd Army, which could be met by the 5th Armored Guards Army, on the planned route there were noted the troops of the Panzer Grenadier Division *Grossdeutschland* (DGrPanc), deployed near Krasnosielc and Przasnysz, which were estimated to consist of 70 tanks and 20 assault guns; the 7th Panzer Division, deployed near Ciechanów, with the strength of approximately 80 tanks and 40 self-propelled guns; the training center of self-

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<sup>19</sup> *Бронесводка штаба 5 зв. ТА*, 13.01.1945, ЦАМО, фонд 332, опись 4948, дело 363, документ 10, pp. 1–2.

<sup>20</sup> Reconnaissance was usually made by taking captives. Cf A. *Drabkin*, *Przeżył jeden ze stu. Radzieccy zwiadowcy podczas Wielkiej Wojny Ojczyźnianej 1941–1945*. Gdańsk 2011.

<sup>21</sup> *Журнал боевых действий 5 зв. ТА...*, p. 10.

propelled artillery from Mława with about 70 armored vehicles and the 507th battalion of heavy tanks, stationing near Gołymin Stary, which was supposed to have 32 vehicles of the *Tiger* type<sup>22</sup>.

### **The Area of Attack and Defensive Conditions**

The area indicated as the direction of the attack, spreading towards the north, was a plain with small hills and valleys of streams. Only 10-20 % of the territory was covered with forests, usually coniferous. Along the line Chorzele – Mława – Sierpc, there was a vast strip of muddy and peaty soil, up to 40 km wide. On the route of the attack of the 5th Armored Guards Army there were a few small rivers, up to 10 m wide, and these were: the Sona, Ładynia, Działdówka and Drwęca. In winter conditions they did not constitute a serious obstacle for the actions of armored troops. The first line of German defense was along the western bank of the Narew river, and it was the most developed towards Soviet bridgeheads, located to the north and south of Pułtusk<sup>23</sup>.

Another defensive line was Ptaki – Kadzidło – Krasnosielc, four km to the west of Maków, through Gołymin Stary, to the east of Nasielsk and to the west of Dębe village; it was leaning against the Narew river. Towards Przasnysz, the line was supported by a natural barrier, the Orzyc river. The third line was leading between the locations of Budki, four km to the south-east of Chorzele – Mchowo, three km to the west of Przasnysz, 10 km to the east of Ciechanów, through Nowe Miasto and further towards Modlin. The fourth line was leading from Janowo, through the Mława strengthened road node, towards Strzegowo and Płońsk. The town of Mława was a strong resistance node. Another two defensive lines were located already behind the pre-war border of East Prussia<sup>24</sup>.

The Germans also prepared a large number of separated resistance points: they set lines of abatis, dag trenches and anti-tank ditches, as well as built barriers on the roads and isthmuses between the lakes. Bigger towns and villages were particularly used to establish strong defense centers. On the edges and in the centers, some brick objects were adjusted for defense. At the beginning of the army's march such resistance points turned out to be Przasnysz, Ciechanów, Grudusk i Napierki<sup>25</sup>.

### **Moving to the Region of Troop Deployment**

On 10 January, direct command of the 5th Armored Guards Army was called in to the headquarters by the administrators of the front, where they were informed,

<sup>22</sup> *Справка о группировке противника, разгромленной войсками 5 гв. ТА, ЦАМО, фонд 45, опись 2394, дело 1224, pp. 1–2.*

<sup>23</sup> *Журнал боевых действий 5 гв. ТА..., p. 12.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem, p. 13.*

<sup>25</sup> *Доклад о боевых действиях 5 гв. ТА. Период с 14.01.1945 по 01.03.1945 г., ЦАМО, фонд 332, опись 4948, дело 342, p. 14.*

with the obligation of military secrecy, about the plans of the offensive operation and the role that was to be assigned in those actions for the large armored formation. After the return, Gen. Wolski fragmentarily informed the unit commanders, his deputies and the commanders of different troops about the upcoming offensive. He gave orders to start preparations for new missions since the following day<sup>26</sup>.

When on 14 January the attack of the 2nd Belorussian Front troops started, during that day the 48th Army and the 2nd Assault Group occupied the first defense line of the enemy and got four-six km deep inside his position. They were fighting on shut-off positions and the middle lines between the first and the second defense line, near Maków and Pułtusk<sup>27</sup>. At that time, the troops of the 5th Armored Guards Army, carrying out the order of the front commander, repeated by the operation order of the army No. 01 dated 13 January, 11.00 o'clock<sup>28</sup>, accomplished a two-day march in full camouflage. Moving in three routes, they completed a distance of 145 km, from the region of centralization Brańsk, Malinowo, Aleksin and by the evening of 15 January they grouped in the region of Jarzabek, Szarłat, Grudunki.

Each of the three groupings followed a separate route. In order to camouflage successfully, the march was led according to advisable regulations. Wheeled transport of the 29th Panzer Corps started its ride on 14 January at 1.00 o'clock and caterpillar-tracked machines at 4.00 p.m. In the case of the 10th Panzer Corps, the ride started respectively at 2.00 a.m. and 2.00 p.m., and the 47th Mechanized Brigade at 9.00 a.m. and 3.00 p.m. All the echelons were given a maximum time for transport, for wheeled and caterpillar-tracked machines it was from 13 to 20 hours. Caterpillar-tracked vehicles set off in the evenings and were to reach the destination before dawn. They were forbidden to ride through the towns of Ostrów Mazowiecka and Wyszaków. In case of the weather excluding the reconnaissance flights of enemy aircrafts, they were allowed to lead the transport during daytime, and at night to use masked headlights<sup>29</sup>.

The units of heavy tanks JS-122 and assault guns ISU-152, in order to protect them from rapid wear, were transported by rail. In this way, the 14th separated guard regiment of heavy tanks, the 326th, 332nd, 365th, 376th guard self-propelled artillery regiments (heavy) were transported – as well as owning the guns SU-100 – the 1207th and 381st self-propelled artillery regiments. In total, 157 machines<sup>30</sup>.

During the two days of the offensive, the 48th Army and the 2nd Assault Group troops took control over the regions of Maków and Pułtusk, broke the

<sup>26</sup> *Журнал боевых действий 5 гв. ТА...*, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> I. Fieduniński, *Na alarm*. Trans. S. Klonowski. Warszawa 1984, pp. 282–284.

<sup>28</sup> Moscow time – time offset is 3 hours from the central European time [the author's note].

<sup>29</sup> *Журнал боевых действий 5 гв. ТА...*, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> *Бронесводка штаба 5 гв. ТА*, 13.01.1945, ЦАМО, фонд 332, опись 4948, дело 363, документ 10, pp. 1–2.

second German defense line and reached the line Dąbrówka – Łukowo – Pniewo Wielkie – Burkat by the dusk of 16 January. They continued pushing the enemy back towards the third defense line, to Przasnysz and Ciechanów. By the operation order of the 2nd Belorussian Front commander No. 34/OP, transmitted by cryptogram on 16 January in the afternoon, the 5th Armored Guards Army was given the assignment: “To gather in the region of Maków, Karniewo, Pieńkowo, Białowieża, Gnojno, Ciepiewo by the morning of 17 January 1945. To stand ready in order to enter the breakthrough from the line of Ciechanów in the general direction towards Mława, Lidzbark”<sup>31</sup>.

Not having time to check the vehicles, which had just covered a long distance, as early as on 16 January at 8.00 p.m. the army troops started moving to the obliged region of the entry into the breakthrough. It was sanctioned by the operation order from 16 January, 4.30 p.m. Marching – depending on the unit – 40–70 km further, with crossing the Narew and Orzyc rivers, the units of the 5th Armored Guards Army reached as a whole the places indicated in the commands by the morning of 17 January<sup>32</sup>.

### **The Army’s Entry into the Breakthrough of the Front**

By the directive No. 1055/Sz from 17 January, 0.30 a.m., the commander of the 2nd Belorussian Front ordered: “at 12.00 o’clock on 17 January 1945, the 5th Armored Guards Army will enter the breakthrough in the sector Maków – Karniewo at the general direction towards Grudusk, Mława, Lidzbark. A closer mission of the army, to march out to the line of Mława by the morning of 18 January, and seize Nidzica and Działdowo by the morning of 19 January”<sup>33</sup>.

Marshal Rokossowski was planning the entry of the 5th Armored Guards Army into the breakthrough of the German defense on the third day of the offensive operation. However, on its very beginning there was a one-day delay caused by a strong resistance of the enemy, who had withdrawn his forces to the second defensive line. The Germans also used panzer reserves for sustaining the front. So, in the places of the most difficult fights, there was a point defense support, using the mobility of the reserve units<sup>34</sup>.

Due to the difficulties in the attack, the Soviet infantry was supported by independent corps: the 1st Panzer Corps, the 8th Panzer Guard Corps and the 8th Mechanized Corps – which absorbed nearly 40% of the front’s armored forces<sup>35</sup>. Only then did they manage to break through the German defense lines and obtain proper conditions to begin the maneuver of entering the breakthrough with rapid

<sup>31</sup> *Журнал боевых действий 5 гв. ТА...*, p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> K. Dieckert, H. Grossmann, *Bój o Prusy Wschodnie. Kronika dramatu 1944–1945*. Trans. W. Sawicki. Gdańsk 2011, p. 127.

<sup>35</sup> A. Радзиевский, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

forces from the assault troops. On 17 January, on the fourth day of fighting, after the attackers had got 20–25 km deep inside the German defense lines, Wolski's army set off from the south towards Mława. The troops were marching in two corps columns, ready for an encounter battle at any moment. The formation of each corps also consisted of two columns with two brigades in each. The separated 47th Mechanized Brigade was moving on the right side of the army's grouping, with the task to repel a potential counterattack. Support units, including the regiments of self-propelled guns, howitzers, anti-aircraft warfare and sapper subdivisions, were divided between both panzer corps so that the columns represented organizational units, capable of carrying out military operations independently<sup>36</sup>.

The 10th Panzer Corps, having the 178th, 183rd and 186th armored brigades, also consisted of the 11th Motorized Rifle Brigade (BrSZmot), the 705th light artillery regiment, the 287th mortar regiment, and also the 727th, 1207th and 1450th self-propelled artillery regiments, the 1639th anti-aircraft artillery regiment, the 128th independent battalion of the guard rocket artillery and the 77th motorcycle battalion. The 29th Panzer Corps, managing another three armored brigades: the 25th, 31st and 32nd, also included the 53rd Motorized Rifle Brigade, the 165th light artillery regiment, the 108th anti-tank artillery regiment, the 271st mortar regiment, as a mobile artillery force it had the 332nd and 365th heavy as well as the 1223rd and 1446th self-propelled artillery regiments, the 409th division of guard rocket artillery, and the reconnaissance support was given by the 75th separated motorcycle battalion. All the groupings were also given additional support from the army reserves, consisting of the 201st Light Artillery Brigade (BrArtL), the 6th Division of Anti-Aircraft, the 689th anti-tank artillery regiment and the 76th guard rocket artillery regiment, and also self-propelled artillery from the so-called reserves of the High Command, administered on the level of the front. Finally, the 10th Panzer Corps was reinforced with the 326th guard regiment of heavy self-propelled guns and the 689th anti-tank artillery regiment. The 29th Panzer Corps was added the 651st howitzer regiment and the 366th anti-aircraft artillery regiment. The 47th Mechanized Brigade, managing the 18th tank regiment, was given as reinforcement the 376th guard regiment of heavy self-propelled guns. Each corps also received a battalion of sappers. All of the armored brigades separated one tank troop from each brigade which constituted reserve groups. In constant reserve of General Wolski was the 14th separated guard regiment of heavy tanks JS-122<sup>37</sup>.

The assignments for the army divisions did not leave the commanders of middle and lower ranks too much leeway in their decisions or independence in moving in the area, but were specified in detail. The 10th Panzer Corps was

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<sup>36</sup> Журнал боевых действий 5 гв. ТА..., p. 21.

<sup>37</sup> Cf Ordre de Bataille 5 APAncGw. On the beginning of January 1945; A. Seaton, *Wojna totalna. Wehrmacht przeciw Armii Czerwonej 1941–1945*. Kraków 2010. Supplement. Ed. A. Wingert, p. 333.



ordered to enter the breakthrough from the line Romanowo – Klimki by 17 January before 2.00 p.m. and to act in routes, the first of which was leading through Romanowo, Stara Wieś, Wężewo, Żbiki, Gołany, Rostkowo, Chojnowo, Węgra, Kosmowo, Zawady and Dąbek; and the other through Klimki, Kurowo, Zielona, Łaguny, Dzielino, Wiśniewo, Grudusk, Komonino, as far as Działy. The corps was supposed to break the defensive line Przasnysz – Ciechanów at once and, by the morning of 18 January, enter the line Tańsk – Mława. Then, the commander of the corps was to bypass Mława and take control over Nidzica by the morning of 19 January. Major anti-tank units were ordered to move in the first route so that they would be ready to resist the counterattacks of the enemy's reserves, launched from the north. The command post for the morning hours of 17 January was established in the village of Majki. The staff and the command were to move in the second route, less exposed to German attacks<sup>38</sup>.

By 1.00 p.m., the 29th Panzer Corps was to enter the breakthrough of the line Wypychy – Dąbki – Pałuki and act in route three – successively through Karniewo, Łukowo, Rączka Wielka, Kołaki-Budzyno, Kołaki Wielkie, Łysakowo colony, Piegłowo, Wola Szydłowska, Wiśniewo; and route four – bypassing Pozewo, Gołymin Stary, Pałuki, Dzbonie, Szulmierz, Jarluty, Strzałkowo, Dąbek, reach Bogurzyn. The corps was supposed to break the line Przasnysz – Ciechanów at once and before morning reach the line Mława – Bogurzyn. Next, bypassing Mława, it was to capture Działdowo by the morning of 19 January. The command post at the moment of setting off for the action was specified to be near the village of Zakręt. The staff was supposed to move in the third route<sup>39</sup>.

The 47th Mechanized Brigade was supposed to follow the 10th Panzer Corps, in routes one and two, being ready to resist the attacks of German reserves from the north and expand the success of the army's first echelon. The command post was set in Głodki. Further, the staff was to move in route two<sup>40</sup>.

The army artillery and the reserves were to directly support armored units. The 76th guard mortar regiment and the 14th separated guard regiment of heavy tanks were obliged to go in route two after the 10th Panzer Corps, the 201st Light Artillery Brigade – without the 651st cannon artillery regiment – route four, after the 29th Panzer Corps, and be ready to support the first echelon at entering the breakthrough as well as at forcing the defensive line Przasnysz – Ciechanów, but also to resist the enemy's counterattacks and act on the flanks of the corps and the 47th Mechanized Brigade. The 6th Division of Anti-Aircraft: by 1062nd regiment was to move in route two in combat order of the 47th Mechanized Brigade, use the 146th regiment in route three to protect the army artillery, use the 516th regiment – without one battery – to act with the staff's operational group and protect the main

<sup>38</sup> Журнал боевых действий 10 тк..., pp. 134–135.

<sup>39</sup> Журнал боевых действий 29 тк..., p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> Журнал боевых действий 47 мехбр, 1.01.1944 – 4.08.1945, ЦАМО, фонд 3350, опись 1, дело 6, p. 85.

divisions of the army from aerial strikes during the march, at entering the breakthrough and fulfilling the tasks, assigned for the first and the second day of the attack.

Engineer troops of the 5th Armored Guards Army were ordered to secure the passage of the panzer army divisions on their enemy's and their own minefields, to recognize by engineering reconnaissance the functioning field and anti-tank fortifications, to prepare the passages through them – also deep inside the German defense – as well as to control the safety of the march of tanks, artillery and transport divisions. To carry out those tasks, the frontal divisions were to be strengthened by the demining forces from the corps sapper units and from the assigned army reserves. The sappers were also ordered to secure crossing water barriers, and by the forces of the frontal miner divisions to be ready to set minefields on the enemy's probable counterattack directions. They were also ordered to prepare their own observation points and command posts<sup>41</sup>.

The troops were successively reaching the places of joining the action and the moment the military operation began, the 29th corps had the possibility to use 120 tanks T-34, 42 self-propelled guns ISU-152, 25 SU-85, 37 SU-76, 10 tanks M4A2 *General Sherman* of American production, three light self-propelled guns SU-57 – also of the US production, 41 guns of 76 mm caliber, seven 57-mm guns, 28 guns of 37 mm, 25 mortars of 120 mm, 38 mortars of 82 mm, 31 armored personnel carriers, 41 motorcycles. For direct fight there could be sent 659 infantry soldiers and 1075 motorized shooters.

The commander of the 29th Panzer Corps separated the units for the march. The first combat echelon of the right column consisted of the 25th Armored Brigade and the 1st company of the 193rd separated battalion of sappers. Its task was to break the enemy's defense in the region of Wypychy – Dębki, enter the breakthrough and by the morning of 18 January seize Wiśniewo. The second combat echelon of the right column, consisting of the 53rd Motorized Rifle Brigade, the 1223rd light self-propelled artillery regiment and the 271st mortar regiment, was ordered to follow the 25th Armored Brigade, develop the success of its attack and break the enemy's grouping in the region of Kołaki-Kwasy, and then capture Wiśniewo before the morning. The second combat echelon of the left column, i.e. the 31st Armored Brigade, the 165th light artillery regiment and the 2nd company of the 193rd separated battalion of sappers, moving in the fourth route, was ordered to break the defense line of Dębki – Pałuki and enter the breakthrough, and afterwards, by the morning, take control over the region of Bogurzyn – Michałowo. The second combat echelon of the left column, which consisted of the 32nd Armored Brigade, was obliged to follow the 31st Armored Brigade, develop the success of its attack and break the approaching enemy reserves in the south of Mława. By the morning of 18 January, the group was supposed to take control over the region of Kosiny Kapiczne village. The reserves

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<sup>41</sup> *Журнал боевых действий 5 зв. ТА...*, p. 21.

of the 29th Panzer Corps command, i.e. the 651st regiment of cannon artillery and the 409th division of *Katiusz*, were ordered to follow the 53rd Motorized Rifle Brigade and be ready to resist the enemy's counterattacks<sup>42</sup>.

Within the first 24 hours of the attack, the army's armored units got over 20 km deep inside the defense and a similar, or even a faster pace, was to be kept within the following days. However, the assignments given to both panzer corps of the 5th Armored Guards Army were more demanding, because in less than two days they were to be 80 km ahead and capture two quite large towns. The 10th Panzer Corps, commanded by Major-General of armored warfare Michail Gordiejewicz Sachno<sup>43</sup>, was pushing towards Nidzica, and the 29th Panzer Corps, under the command of Major-General of armored warfare Ksenofont Michajłowicz Małachow<sup>44</sup>, kept its general direction towards Działdowo<sup>45</sup>.

At the moment of the entry of the panzer army into the breakthrough, also the methods and forms of actions of the scouting parties changed. At that time, military intelligence, researching the territory before the brigades marching in columns, had to be particularly active. Intelligence groups were to establish where the enemy's reserves were, what the forces of their artillery and tanks were, where the Germans had their temporary defense lines and whether they were manned. Both panzer corps and the 47th Mechanized Brigade started the military and tactics reconnaissance in the directions of their march and on its flanks. In each armored battalion there was an intelligence platoon, moving ahead of the frontal division, and that one ahead of the main forces<sup>46</sup>. Towards the front and on the flanks of the striking groups, there were also scout groups, separated from a unit prepared especially for that, and in the case of the 5th Armored Guards Army from the 1st independent motorcycle regiment, divided into battalions subordinate to panzer corps. The regiment sent scout groups in two directions of the attack: on the route Przasnysz, Dzierzgowo, Nowa Wieś Wielka, Nidzica and towards Pałuki, Regimin, Szreńsk, Zielona<sup>47</sup>.

### **Encountering the Enemy – First Fights**

Already since the first hours of entering the breakthrough, Soviet units had to perform military operations. The attackers' ally was surprising the enemy by appearing in unexpected places. The striking force and its suddenness as well

<sup>42</sup> *Журнал боевых действий 29 тк*, 30.09.1944 – 9.05.1945, ЦАМО, фонд 3420, опись 1, дело 25, р. 51.

<sup>43</sup> ЦАМО, фонд 33, опись 686046, единица хранения 40, pp. 231–232.

<sup>44</sup> ЦАМО, фонд 33, опись 686046, единица хранения 40, pp. 173–174.

<sup>45</sup> А. Радзиевский., *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>46</sup> Д. Давыдов, В. Хействер, *Организация танковой разведки в наступлении*. Красная звезда, No. 83 от 8 апреля 1945 г., p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> The second group got as far as near Dzierzgoń, and after 20 January the scouts were transferred near Tolkmicko. ЦАМО, фонд 33, опись 686196, единица хранения 3253, pp. 7–8.

operating high-speed units, difficult to restrain without proper maneuvering the defense forces, constituted further advantages. The Soviets also perfectly used the opponent's fear of getting through to their rear areas. Equally important for the success of the offensive was the extreme winter weather because the continuing frost allowed the tanks to move safely on usually muddy but, during the fights, frozen territories, leading straight to the former border between Poland and the East-Prussian district of Germany<sup>48</sup>.

Exactly on 17 January at midday, the 5th Armored Guards Army troops were led into the breakthrough of the front along the sector of Maków Mazowiecki – Karniewo – Gołmin. The major corps brigades – in the 10th Panzer Corps these were the 186th and 178th Armored Brigades, and the 25th and 31st Armored Brigades in the 29th Panzer Corps – released strong front divisions ahead of them, consisting of not fewer than a battalion of tanks, an artillery battery of self-propelled guns, a company of motorized shooters, a company of sappers and an anti-aircraft group, protecting from aerial attacks. The frontal troops, having scout groups ahead of them, moved forward ready to take up a fight. The arrangement of the front allowed the tankers to start breaking through the enemy's third defense line, at the front's depth of 13-14 km. Arranging the fighting order in four routes caused that the Red Army soldiers were prepared to resist the German tanks' counterattacks, carried out from the flank – the counterattack of the Panzer Grenadier Division *Grossdeutschland* was expected from the Przasnysz side, from Mława – the 7th Panzer Division. The distribution of the Soviet army forces also allowed gaining, in proper time, information on the opponent and the location of engineering obstacles, positioning the units and transferring them safely on flanks as well as commanding the troops efficiently<sup>49</sup>.

At 3.00 p.m. the tanks got through the lines of the first-line 53rd Rifle Corps (KS) of the 48th Army on the line: Zalesie – Moszaki – Kołaczków – Pałuki and immediately attacked the German 299th and 7th Infantry Divisions standing in front of them, consisting of about two infantry regiments and having the support of 15-20 tanks and self-propelled guns, as well as to the 10th artillery battery and mortars. The German units took the shutting-off positions on the army's right flank between the second and the third defense lines and on the left flank – they were on the third line.

The strongest resistance was on the right flank, where the 10th Panzer Corps attacked, and opposite 10-12 self-propelled guns were defending to the infantry regiment, with the support of about five artillery batteries. Not only did the Germans want to hold back the actions of the Red Army soldiers from the 10th Panzer Corps, but they also counterattacked twice from the region of Krasne and Kozin. The commander of the Soviet corps was forced to expand and introduce for the fight two entire armored brigades – the 186th and 178th. Soon, with part of the

<sup>48</sup> K. Sobczak, *Operacja mazowiecko-mazurska 1944–1945*. Warszawa 1967, pp. 197–198.

<sup>49</sup> *Журнал боевых действий 5 зв. ТА...*, p. 21

forces, he threw the opponent troops off the position, and with the main attack headed for Krasne from the east and Kozin from the west. After heavy two-hour fights, the brigades broke the Germans in the region of Zalesie, Krasne, Kozin, Moszaki and continued marching towards the north-west direction. By 9.00 p.m., the 10th Panzer Corps crossed the road Przasnysz – Maków in the fights. The troops reached: the 186th Armored Brigade – Golany, the 178th Armored Brigade – Łaguny, 183 BrPanc – Kozłowo, the 11th Motorized Rifle Brigade – Nowy<sup>50</sup>.

Whereas the 29th Panzer Corps – after passing by the posts of infantry from the 48th Army and entering the breakthrough – met the enemy's resistance on the line Koleczkowo – Bogurzyn and further on the frontline Pokojewo – Trentowo – Opinogóra Górna. That is where the frontal troops of the 25th Armored Brigade, moving in the first route, at 4.30 p.m. met the enemy in the region of Wielka – Trentowo. The infantry battalion supported by four tanks and two artillery batteries resisted. The strike of the brigade caused that the enemy was thrown off their positions. Three guns and about 60 people were liquidated, one gun and two motorcycles were taken over. Continuing the attack, the brigade captured Załuże at 6.00 p.m. In that fight, one of the T-34 tanks was lost. At the same time, on the line Opinogóra Górna, the 31st Armored Brigade scattered the enemy infantry and, without a serious resistance from the enemy's side, it captured the village of Dzbonie by 6.00 p.m.<sup>51</sup>

Those were, however, much weaker attempts to stop the Soviet tanks than in the case of the 10th Panzer Corps. The Germans managed the divisions with the force of up to two infantry battalions, supported by several armored vehicles and three artillery batteries. Two brigades of the 29th Panzer Corps – the 25th and the 31st Armored Brigades – with the forces of their front troops, without positioning the whole units, attacked immediately and broke the enemy's third fortification line. By 5.30 p.m., the troops intersected the road Przasnysz – Ciechanów and captured: the 25th Armored Brigade – Sosnowo, the 31st Armored Brigade – the crossroads in this region, the 32nd Armored Brigade – following the 31st brigade – reached Czernice, and the 53rd Motorized Rifle Brigade – after the 25th brigade – reached Rębowo.

Without stopping, the divisions of the 29th Panzer Corps continued their operations and the 25th Armored Brigade, dropping the rearguard of the retreating enemy, at night reached the region of the external defense zone of the Mława fortification region: the Kozły station, located four km to the south of Grudusk, and the Mierzanowo village. On this line the Germans showed resistance in the form of two infantry battalions and three artillery batteries. By 3.00 o'clock, the brigade captured the Kozły station in the fight. By the command of the corps commander, tanks remained on the frontline with the task of protecting the right flank of the grouping.

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<sup>50</sup> *Журнал боевых действий 10 тк...*, p. 135.

<sup>51</sup> *Журнал боевых действий 29 тк...*, p. 52.

The 31st Armored Brigade, moving at the front of the corps' left route, on the line Przybyszewo – Regimin attacked and broke the weak forces of the enemy, which were occupying the shutting-off positions, and by the end of 17 January it took control over Żmijewo Ponki. At the Konopki station, however, the opponent showed strong resistance of the troops from the 7th Infantry Division and the 511th construction battalion against the brigade, reinforced by artillery. After a short gunfire from afar, the tanks attacked and by 1.00 a.m. on 18 January they captured the station.

At that time the 32nd Armored Brigade, attacking after the 31st Armored Brigade, entered the region of Zeńbok, Jarluty Duże and overnight carried out fuel replenishment, getting ready to take the position of a vanguard troop. Soon it set off towards Działdowo, bypassing Mława from the south and west. By the end of the day, the 53rd Motorized Rifle Brigade marched out into the region of Kołaki-Kwasy, nine km to the north-west of Ciechanów<sup>52</sup>.

The 47th Mechanized Brigade, which was in the second echelon behind the 10th Panzer Corps, did not have a military encounter with the enemy until the end of the day<sup>53</sup>.

The first day of the military actions of the 5th Armored Guards Army brought a conclusion that moving forward of both corps was too slow and did not meet the expectations of Marshal Rokossowski. The commander of the front started to grow impatient and already on 17 January gave new orders. So as to accelerate the actions of the 10th Panzer Corps, he charged the 8th Mechanized Corps, which was at that time supporting the actions of the 48th Army, with the task to liquidate German resistance near Grudusk. The right flank of the 48th Army was to be reinforced by introducing the 3rd Guard Cavalry Corps (3 KKGw) to the fights<sup>54</sup>. The 5th Armored Guards Army was ordered to restart the offensive on the north as early as at that night. General Wolski soon gave his units details concerning the acceleration of actions on the hitherto directions of the attack – passing round Mława and moving straight into the region of Nidzica and Działdowo<sup>55</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> M. Tarczyński, *Rajd elbląski kpt. G. L. Diaczenki na tle działań 29 znamieńskiego Korpusu Pancernego Gwardii (23–26 I 1945)*. Rocznik Elbląski 1976, Vol. 7, p. 33.

<sup>53</sup> *Журнал боевых действий 5 зв. ТА...*, p. 24.

<sup>54</sup> Independent corps were at that time introduced to the operation zones of particular general military armies. *Historia II wojny światowej 1939–1945 w 12 tomach*, Vol. 10: *Calkowite rozbicie faszystowskich Niemiec*. Polish Ed. T. Szaciło et al., trans. E. Kozłowski, P. Marcinişzyn. Warszawa 1983, pp. 126–127.

<sup>55</sup> П. Егоров, И. Кривоборский, И. Ивлев, А. Рогалевич, *Дорогами побед. Боевой путь 5-й гвардейской танковой армии*. Москва 1969, pp. 299–300.

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## SUMMARY

The article presents the maneuver of the entry of the 5th Guards Tank Army into the frontal breakthrough during German-Soviet clashes in January 1945, which was carried out as part of the offensive operation of the 2nd Belorussian Front of the Red Army from northern Mazovia towards the former East Prussia. The author, using the documents of the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation in Podolsk and literature on the subject, presents direct preparations for the armored strike, marches for combat positions and the first day of fighting.

## STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł przedstawia manewr wprowadzenia 5 Armii Pancerniej Gwardii w przełamanie frontu podczas starć niemiecko-sowieckich w styczniu 1945 roku, który został wykonany w ramach operacji ofensywnej drugiego frontu białoruskiego Armii Czerwonej z północnego Mazowsza w kierunku ówczesnych Prus Wschodnich. Autor, korzystając z dokumentów Centralnego Archiwum Ministerstwa Obrony Federacji Rosyjskiej w Podolsku oraz literatury przedmiotu, prezentuje bezpośrednie przygotowania do uderzenia pancernego, marsze na pozycje bojowe oraz pierwszy dzień walk.



**Key words:** entry into the breakthrough, Red Army, northern Mazovia, January 1945

**Słowa kluczowe:** wejście w przełamanie, Armia Czerwona, północne Mazowsze, styczeń 1945

