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Winter Fighting of the 253d Infantry Division

In the Rzhev Area in 1941 - 1942



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(Based on Personal Experience)

Experiences and difficulties of this German division in the Russian Campaign. Attack of the division across the Volga River; movements of the infantry regiments; defensive organization of the position taken for the winter; preparation of the troops for winter warfare; attacks by the Russians in the severest weather; disastrous effects of the cold on men and weapons; retreat across the Volga; destruction of artillery equipment because of the impossibility of moving it through the deep snow; and details of the new defensive position. The lessons learned in winter warfare are summarized.

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### Introduction

In mid-September the German 253d Infantry Division prepared for greater mobility after experiencing many difficulties in its advance through swamps, mud, and sand. It was decided, therefore, to change over from the motorized ammunition and supply trucks with their heavy rubber tires to the light, horse-drawn Panje carts locally in use by the Russian peasants. Regimental and division headquarters were provided with horses and a few motor vehicles. The amounts of ammunition, materiel, clothing, and personal baggage were also reduced since the number of troops had decreased through casualties. After loading tests, the division ordered all of its organic units to be equipped with vehicles and horses. The division's motor vehicles remained at a special depot which the division had established at Toropets.

The line units initially opposed this change, but conceded later that it was to their advantage.

#### I. Attack Across the Volga River and Capture of Selizharovo

In mid-October, after moderate fighting but great terrain difficulties, the division's main body reached Soblago (about 84 miles northwest of Velikie Luki) and the area southwest of it. A reinforced battalion had advanced as far as Peno and crossed the Volga. The muddy roads prevented the horse-drawn artillery (150-mm howitzers) from following, and it caught up with the division only weeks later after freezing weather had set in.

At Peno the Russians had demolished both bridges across the Volga, burned down all railroad installations, and set fire to the giant wood piles on the bank of the Volga.



The reconnaissance patrol which pushed across the Volga did not encounter the enemy who had withdrawn to Ostashkov.

Several days of rest gave the German troops an opportunity to recuperate from the exhausting march and to bring up units which had been delayed.

When the advance began the division had been assigned to Sixteenth Army on the right wing of Army Group North. Then it was transferred to the Ninth Army, to the left wing of Army Group Center. In late August it was reassigned to Sixteenth Army. At Soblago it was permanently assigned to Ninth Army. These frequent changes on the boundaries separating the army groups had handicapped the division greatly, especially in obtaining supplies. The higher echelons wanted the division to perform well in combat, but whenever the question of rations, ammunition, and other supplies was raised the division was referred from one army to the other, because the delivery of supplies was extremely difficult due to the great distances, the badly mired roads, and the frequent lack of signal communications. There were many other disadvantages that resulted from the division's frequent reassignment: the higher commanders were unable to make personal decisions regarding the division's leadership, condition, and supply; instructions and orders failed to reach the division on time, and mail was overdue.

This experience should serve as a lesson that a frequent change in unit assignments, especially at boundaries should be avoided. However, if there is no other alternative the supply of divisions which are more or less self-sustaining should receive special attention and care. Otherwise, these divisions will be unable to carry out their combat missions fully, or even in part.



In mid-October XXIII Corps (Ninth Army) ordered the division at Soblago to take immediate possession of the Volga crossings near Selizharovo about 51 miles northwest of Rzhev. The march led through swamps which after heavy rains had turned into a bog. This particular area had no hard-surfaced highways and was sparsely populated; there were a few forest lanes, but they were so full of deep holes that even small horse-drawn vehicles were hardly able to pass. Corduroy roads and crossings over small creeks constantly had to be constructed. All this slowed down the march considerably. Great difficulties were also experienced in building a temporary bridge across the Shupopa River because of the unfavorable terrain along its banks. The demands on the men, horses, and vehicles were unusually heavy, but all difficulties were overcome. The division's light equipment now paid off.

During the final part of the march the terrain and road conditions improved. The nightly frost which began in late October aided the division's advance in the early morning when the roads were still frozen.

The division advanced in march units. The 473d Infantry Regiment was diverted north to capture the railroad bridge north of Selizharovo. Despite its rapid advance the regiment arrived too late since the Russians had already blown up all bridges across the Volga. During the night before the German units reached the Volga, conflagrations and numerous detonations in Selizharovo had led the German command to believe that the Russians would abandon the area without fighting. This assumption, however, proved incorrect.

The division advanced along the Volga without support on its right or left, but with two infantry regiments committed in front. The German artillery had difficulty in finding positions offering adequate cover and possibilities for effective fire, since the enemy held the higher river bank.



Reconnaissance established that the Russians had built a closely knit and deeply echeloned system of fortifications at the Volga. The enemy installations were difficult to detect because the Russians excelled in camouflage and maintained strict discipline. Nevertheless, the appearance of embrasures in the enemy's bunkers, the ground positions covered on top according to Russian methods, and the smoke from the heated dugouts revealed the presence of Russian fortifications to the skilled German observers.

The division now faced the Russian Volga position which in the summer of 1941 had been constructed by thousands of laborers. In fact, the position represented an intricate maze of deep and wide anti-tank ditches. A company was withdrawn from the regiment on the left and dispatched across the Volga to conduct forced reconnaissance. It encountered strong fortifications and confirmed the reports of previous patrols that many more Russian bunkers which had not been identified earlier were located in the woods across the river.

The Russian artillery did not appear very strong, but it was alert and, similar to the heavy mortar fire that harassed the German troops, great caution was required in approaching and reconnoitering its positions.

Maintaining a steady flow of supplies was the division's main concern. Supplies were to be drawn directly from the forward supply depot of the Chief of Supply and Administration at Toropets. Although the distance between the division and the supply depot was 72 miles, the somewhat shorter road to Rzhev was even less favorable. Nevertheless, for reasons mentioned earlier, the division preferred to be independent regarding its supplies. The division supply officer who was billeted near Okhvat was responsible for the supply deliveries from Toropets. His horse-drawn columns were distributed along the Selizharovo -



Okhvat highway in such a manner that each column occupied a village at 12 mile intervals. Through this relay system the long distance could be overcome. The measure proved its worth especially in time of snowfalls and drifts, since the column leaders, who were at the same time the post commanders, were responsible for keeping the roads open, clearing them of snow, and building snow fences. It is possible that these expedients also prevented partisan attacks against the supply columns.

In late October the commander of XXIII Corps held a conference at 102d Infantry Division headquarters at Yeltsy (approximately 36 miles northwest of Rzhev). At this conference the 253d Infantry Division was ordered to cross the Volga and seize the area around Selizharovo. The 102d Infantry Division was to support the attack by thrusting to the northwest and northeast.

The 634th Medium Artillery Battalion (motorized, 100-mm guns) was brought up since the division artillery had not yet arrived. The division artillery regiment could release only two of its battalions for the attack.

The 464th Infantry Regiment was to carry out the attack across the Volga. The 473d Infantry Regiment which had been transferred from the Selizharovo front to Fegelein's SS Cavalry Brigade, was assembled behind the 464th Infantry Regiment. The division engineer battalion was ordered to pull out one company for the 464th Infantry Regiment's crossing and for the construction of a bridge across the Volga.

After conducting local reconnaissance in person, the division commander ordered the crossing to be made about six miles southeast of Selizharovo. The division command post was set up behind the crossing site. The attack began at dawn on 6 November and surprised the enemy. The first waves reached the



enemy bank on pneumatic floats and immediately attacked the enemy who was occupying higher ground. It soon became necessary to move the crossing site farther downstream to prevent the enemy from shelling the German infantry heavy weapons and artillery during the river crossing.

While the Russian artillery fire was not very effective, the German artillery gave good support to the infantry, enabling it to seize the hill positions and to form a bridgehead in minimum time. The construction of a bridge began immediately. Some parts of the bridge had to be built provisionally since there were not sufficient pontoons available - the Volga was about 400 feet wide. On the whole, the bridge was completed rapidly and it facilitated the attack, especially the bringing up of artillery, vehicles, and supplies. Reconnaissance was carried out from the bridgehead which revealed that many Russian bunkers in the woods bordering the Selizharovo highway were strongly occupied and that at a distance of about half a mile from the German line the enemy was occupying dug-outs, bunkers, and anti-tank ditches.

After crossing the Volga, the 473d Infantry Regiment assembled to the right behind the 464th Infantry Regiment in small wooded areas. The division had ordered an attack for the next day. The 464th Infantry Regiment was to advance northward, break through the enemy system of defenses, then turn left and seize the high ground in the northeast of Selizharovo. The 253d Reconnaissance Battalion was assigned to the regiment and committed on either side of the Selizharovo highway to cover the regiment's attack.

The 473d Infantry Regiment adjacent to the 464th Infantry Regiment was to take possession of the enemy positions facing it and then push to the north to seize Hill 318. The regiment accomplished its mission without encountering any major opposition.



The 464th Infantry Regiment, on the other hand, had to penetrate the system of enemy bunkers in bitter fighting and found the anti-tank ditches a considerable obstacle. Fortunately, the retreating Russians had failed to destroy most anti-tank ditch crossings along the road; whenever they were demolished, the regiment bridged the ditches with its own equipment. As the attack progressed enemy resistance stiffened in the sector of the 464th Infantry Regiment. Its left wing was contained by fire from the woods north of the Selizharovo highway. German losses were increasing.

In order to step up the attack on both sides of the highway the division withdrew the headquarters and some elements of the 453d Infantry Regiment from the Selizharovo front and committed them in the left sector adjacent to the 464th Infantry Regiment. The latter was ordered to seize Selizharovo in its advance along the highway. The attack progressed only slowly since it was delayed by numerous bunkers in the broken, hilly and wooded terrain.

The division's attack was in danger of bogging down when, during the night, the 2d Battalion of the 464th Infantry Regiment, led along the railroad line by its daring commander, Captain Grotheer, broke through the enemy lines and advanced to the Selizharovka River. On the following morning other elements of the regiment also pushed on to the water, and fought their way through to the Selizharovo - Ostashkov highway, capturing the bunkers approximately one mile northwest of Selizharovo. The regiment also seized some villages northeast of Selizharovo. By this time the regiment's strength was exhausted, and the division relieved it and committed the 473d Infantry Regiment, which was to continue the attack and mop up the woods as far as the Volga north of the railroad bridge. The regiment also reached the Selizharovo - Ostashkov highway.



However, all attempts to penetrate into the woods across the anti-tank ditches and into the open spaces on either side of the highway failed due to the Russian flanking fire from the north and the machine-gun, mortar, and anti-tank fire from bunkers in the woods. The Russians began their counterattacks at this time, directed especially against a village on the hill. Heavy fighting ensued, and the village seemed temporarily lost. However, the attacks were eventually repelled and the Russians suffered heavy losses.

The 453d Infantry Regiment was committed at this time to support the 473d Infantry Regiment on the right and ordered to attack a village located at the point where the Volga emerges from the great Volga Lake. In its advance the regiment destroyed several bunkers, and then succeeded in capturing the anti-tank ditch which ran nearly parallel to the highway. It used this anti-tank ditch to destroy the enemy pockets and then pushed rapidly to the Volga.

The German units exploited this success and mopped up the woods.

The division command post moved to Selizharovo.

The fighting for the Volga and Selizharovo ended in mid-November. The German troops were greatly exhausted, especially the infantry which had mostly fought without artillery support. The occasional commitment of 88-mm anti-aircraft guns was of great assistance, and on several occasions they destroyed enemy bunkers with direct fire. The 37-mm anti-tank guns also assisted the infantry and effectively neutralized enemy fire from the embrasures of the bunkers. Enemy losses in dead, prisoners, guns, and materiel were considerable, as were the German losses. The weather, freezing temperatures and snow, had increased the exertions of the troops, who could not always get enough warm food during the



days of fighting. Their performance therefore deserves even greater recognition. It proved that the aggressiveness which had distinguished these troops during the division's initial advance had not abated.

After completing its mission in this sector, the division was ordered to capture Ostashkov. The division, in turn, reported that it was in no condition to undertake this operation because its strength was inadequate to carry out such an extensive attack. The plan was finally abandoned and the construction of a defensive position was ordered.

Even before receiving this order, the division had already changed over to the defense. This defensive mission which in itself was contrary to the German soldier's nature was rendered more difficult by the lack of suitable entrenching tools. The troops, without adequate winter clothing and equipment, were left in the woods right where the attack had halted, on ground that was frozen several inches deep and covered with snow. The division's sector, which was approximately 40 miles wide, had to be held by elements of the infantry and engineer units which were greatly depleted and were inadequate for the large sub-sectors of the regiments. It was not strange, therefore, that the troops began the construction of the defensive positions reluctantly.

Sectors were assigned to the regiments by the division. The 464th Infantry Regiment, facing northeast, had only loose contact with the 102d Infantry Division on the right in dense woods; the regiment's sector by-passed Hill 318 and its left wing adjoined the Selizharovka River. One battalion of the 253d Artillery Regiment was committed in this sector. The 464th Infantry Regiment was adjoined by the 473d Infantry Regiment facing northwest. The left flank of the latter unit extended several hundred yards beyond the Ostashkov highway. There it



adjoined the 453d Infantry Regiment which had two battalions committed on the east side of the Volga and one battalion on the west side. One artillery battalion each was committed in the sectors of the 473d and 453d Infantry Regiments. The medium artillery battalion which had meanwhile arrived was employed west of the Volga, where its positions offered good observation and favorable conditions for its effective commitment. The artillery battalion proved its full worth during the defensive fighting that followed.

The engineer battalion could release only a few small detachments for the construction of the infantry position where the engineers were primarily engaged in breaking up the frozen ground. The engineer battalion worked full time on the construction of bridges across the Selizharovka and later on bridges across the Volga at Selizharovo. The restoration of these bridges which had been destroyed by the Russians were very difficult to the high and steep river bank; nevertheless, their tactical and logistical importance was considerable. As soon as the Volga froze over, the engineers switched over to constructing an ice bridge, which was passable for all vehicles and, after the heavy frosts set in, was completed ahead of the wooden bridge. The engineer battalion was also ordered to bring up to the infantry position wooden frames for shelters which had been manufactured according to definite specifications.

Two companies of the anti-tank battalion were committed in front, while battalion headquarters and one company remained at Selizharovo as division reserve.

The Volga which expanded northwest of Selizharovo into many miles of lakes was not yet frozen and consequently presented a reliable barrier to the enemy; the 253d Reconnaissance Battalion was therefore sufficient to guard the south shore of the lake.



The boundary line to the 123d Infantry Division to the left passed directly east of Peno. This division's reconnaissance battalion had advanced northeast beyond the Peno Straits. Both reconnaissance battalions maintained contact with each other, although, due to the large distances, it was frequently interrupted.

After overcoming the initial obstacles, the troops made good progress in constructing the defensive positions; every effort was made to provide them with shelter for the impending cold and inclement weather. Fire and observation lanes were cut through the woods, and, since in the beginning there was a shortage of barbed wire entanglements, branches were used as obstacles. Later on, abatis were set up in the frozen terrain and knife-rests placed on the snow. The division ordered that the fire positions were to be organized in open terrain so that the sentries had unobstructed vision and could hear well, especially at night. In the open terrain the sentries also had an unobstructed field for throwing hand grenades.

During the preparation of the position German patrols constantly harassed the enemy positions which were close to the German lines, just a few miles off the right wing in the sector of the 464th Infantry Regiment, and a few hundred yards off the left wing in the sector of the 453d Infantry Regiment. German assault detachments up to company strength were also successful in harassing the enemy, and taking prisoners. This patrol activity considerably improved the morale of the German troops.

In early December the 464th Infantry Regiment had to withstand a heavy enemy attack against its right wing. During this encounter a village in the vicinity of Hill 318 and a hamlet in the woods on the boundary of the 102d Infantry Division sector were lost, but recaptured soon after in a German



counterattack. Later on, there were frequent clashes with the enemy in the woods when Russian ski patrols penetrated deep into the German lines.

The Russians tried in vain to break through the positions of the 453d Infantry Regiment directly east of the large Volga Lake. Their forces were superior, but the attacks collapsed in the defensive fire of the German infantry which received excellent artillery support, especially from the medium artillery battalion on the other side of the Volga River.

On orders from higher headquarters and for purposes of relief and training, each division was to pull out one infantry regiment and reinforce at least one company with infantry heavy weapons and prepare it for winter mobility with skis and sleds. In mid-December the headquarters and two battalions of the 453d Infantry Regiment, which had been committed on the east bank of the Volga, were pulled out of the line and the sector of the 473d Infantry Regiment was extended as far as the Volga Lake. The 453d Infantry Regiment moved into the area southwest of Selizharovo. There the division activated one company on skis from the troops which had been pulled out of the line. Infantry heavy weapons, anti-tank guns, and field kitchens were provisionally placed on skis or sleighs, radio equipment was placed in insulated boxes, and other measures were taken to assure the troops' combat readiness in snow and ice. However, due to changes in the situation, these efforts could be entirely completed.

As a result of the severe cold, the Volga Lake had frozen over and they no longer presented a barrier to the enemy. There were reports and other indications that the northern shores of these lakes were occupied by the enemy, and that the Russians were contemplating an attack in this area. Contact with the adjacent division on the left was broken because the reconnaissance battalion of the 123d Infantry Division had moved farther west to its division.



The division therefore recommitted the 453d Infantry Regiment on the southern shores of the lakes with the command post in Shuvayevo, and assigned it to the sector which extended from the lake's eastern shore to the division's left boundary. The division reconnaissance battalion was attached to the regiment and an artillery battalion was brought up from the east bank of the Volga. The regiment committed both battalions and two batteries to the north and north-east of Shuvayevo; adjacent on the right was the reconnaissance battalion which extended to the battalion already in line. To the rear of this battalion's left wing a battery moved into position.

The regiment was unable to form a solid defense line because of the width of its sector. It had to exploit, especially in the center of its sector, any available elevated terrain in villages or at the edge of woods for machine-gun positions to cover the intermediate areas with flanking fire. The artillery and infantry heavy weapons were to participate in the defensive fire in their respective range, but they were still much too weak. The severe cold, the deep frozen ground, and heavy snow frequently forced the German troops to establish a defense line at the edge of villages and in huts and barns. Since these buildings usually consisted of wood, firing slits for machine guns could be easily established; the height of these slits from the ground was determined by the thickness of the layer of snow, so that it had to be at least three feet above the ground.

The division was greatly concerned about the gap which existed to the adjacent unit on the left. It repeatedly pointed out this danger to higher headquarters and requested reinforcements for Peno with the result that the reconnaissance battalion of the SS Cavalry Brigade was finally moved up. During the Christmas holidays this reconnaissance battalion was attacked by greatly superior forces and wiped out despite its fierce and courageous resistance.



The two companies at the 453d Infantry Regiment's left wing which had been hastily organized were also attacked on Christmas day by greatly superior Russian forces. During the night a Russian regiment had crossed the Volga unobserved and at dawn attacked the front and flanks of the two companies. However, the enemy attack bogged down in the deep snow and failed. This success to some extent restored the morale of the German troops.

In early January there were new indications that the enemy was planning an offensive; the arrival of Russian reinforcements and guns was observed. The division therefore prepared for an imminent attack. The enemy offensive, directed mainly against the regiment's center and left wing, began on 9 January. The Russians advanced in dense waves across the frozen Volga Lake which was covered by deep snow. The German artillery fire, especially the heavy artillery battalion's flanking fire, was accurate and contributed materially to check the attack on the enemy's eastern wing. Advancing through the snow only slowly and without cover, the Russians came within German machine-gun range and suffered heavy losses. New waves replaced them. In the course of the fighting several German machine-gun positions were destroyed by enemy artillery fire; in some of the German positions a shortage of ammunition became apparent. As a result, the Russians broke through the greater part of the reconnaissance battalion's sector and advanced into the woods toward Shuvayevo. The other elements of the 453d Infantry Regiment held their positions and blocked the enemy points of penetration.

As the fighting progressed, the division committed the greatly weakened engineer battalion just east of the breakthrough, and withdrew the headquarters of the 464th Infantry Regiment from the area east of Selizharovo to direct the defense east of the breakthrough, since the commander of the 453d Infantry



Regiment at Shuvayevo had lost contact with this sector. The southern shore of the Volga Lake north of Shuvayevo was eventually lost, but the defending units frustrated all enemy attempts at penetration and continued to hold the villages farther south. The heavy fighting continued for many days and nights; the German troops distinguished themselves in the fighting and braved the bitter cold of  $-40^{\circ}$  F. and more. They endured this cold only because they were frequently relieved and given a chance to get warm in huts or dugouts; at the same time they were also able to thaw their frozen weapons.

The Russians suffered even more from the cold despite their winter clothing, since they were out in the open. This explains why the fighting was centered mainly around the villages.

Gradually the Russians penetrated the woods behind the German lines, but their attempt to capture Shuvayevo was frustrated by the 453d Infantry Regiment headquarters and supply troops. The enemy established himself firmly in the woods around Shuvayevo, but exhaustion from lack of supplies temporarily reduced his combat strength. Nevertheless, it was almost miraculous that later, at the time of the German withdrawal via Shuvayevo, the German troops to the north including two batteries were able to break through the enemy lines over the only passable road in the area without drawing enemy fire, although they passed within a few hundred yards from the Russian positions.

## II. Withdrawal from the Volga to the Molodoy - Tud Position

During this fighting the division was ordered to withdraw in the direction of Kholmets (about 36 miles west of Rzhev). Without enemy interference, the German troops east of the Volga moved across the Volga bridge under the protection of a rear guard. After the crossing the bridge was blown up. The only



road available for the further withdrawal was the division's supply route which was passable to some extent.

The withdrawal was suddenly interrupted by an order from Hitler, strictly forbidding any further retreat. On the following day it was superseded by an order directing that the retreat be continued and that certain lines were to be held a few days longer. The Hitler order was to have disastrous consequences. The horse-drawn artillery which was already withdrawing had to return to its former position. During a later withdrawal it never did get out of the deep snow and was forced to destroy its guns. The 634th Artillery Battalion (motorized) ran out of fuel and was also compelled to demolish its guns and burn most of its prime movers and motor vehicles.

The division learned that the 189th Infantry Regiment, which had been transferred to Okhvat although originally it had been directed to close the Penc gap, had been wiped out in the heavy fighting near Okhvat. Several horse-drawn columns committed separately on the supply route had met the same fate. In order to protect its withdrawal movement, the division withdrew one company each from the 464th Infantry Regiment and the anti-tank battalion and dispatched them on the road leading westward; the division also committed a small regimental combat team for this purpose. These troops accomplished their mission in bitter fighting and prevented the enemy from interfering with the withdrawal movement from the west and northwest. Similar attempts by the enemy from the north and from Selizharovo were frustrated by the stiff resistance of the German rear guards.

The withdrawal continued under extremely difficult conditions. There were no roads via Kashino to the south, and frequently the German troops had to



march through snow-bound woods. Motor vehicles and motorcycles could not get through and had to be destroyed. Due to lack of forage and the extreme cold the horses were unable to pull heavy loads. As a result, the division lost all but four artillery pieces and most of its infantry heavy weapons. Many horses perished. Nevertheless, most of the German wounded were evacuated in time.

Despite these difficulties, the withdrawal proceeded systematically and orderly, and was completed around 20 January.

### III. Fighting in the Molodoy - Tud Position

There was to be no rest for the troops who were greatly exhausted from the exertions of the withdrawal movement. Despite its diminished combat strength, the division was again assigned a very wide sector of about 24 miles in its new position. This sector, which adjoined that of the 102d Infantry Division, extended from the Molodoy - Tud salient northwest of Kholmets in an arc projecting northeastward as far as the point of intersection between the railroad line and the highway approximately six miles east of Nelidovo. The nature of the terrain made it necessary that the position northwest of Kholmets be advanced to the north bank of the Molodoy Tud River. This salient was held although later it was exposed to frequent attacks. In the right half of the sector the terrain favored the defense. Towering mountain ridges offered the advantage of good observation and a good field of fire, while in the left sector of the positions the terrain was wooded. The entire German rear area was obscured to enemy observation. The road between Nelidovo and Kholmets and a road from Mostovaya running northeast and joining the above road six miles before Kholmets was especially important. For tactical reasons these roads had to be maintained



in the best possible condition. Because of snowdrifts they frequently could not be used for a long time, until the situation was improved by snow fences (fir-trees joined together). The clearing of roads in this sparsely populated area became especially difficult and was a source of great concern to the German command, since all troops were needed for construction of the position, which left only a small force for road work.

On the basis of their experiences in the Volga position, the German troops applied all their energy in the construction of the positions. In this instance the villages were fortified first since for the greater part they were situated on hills. In view of the existing difficulties - large sectors and understrength units - opinions differed as to how the defensive position should be constructed. It was a question whether a continuous line or individual strong-points were to be established. The system of strong points would afford closer concentration and better control over the troops, as well as closer co-operation with the heavy weapons, and a small echelonment in depth. A continuous line, on the other hand, would provide better observation and the possibility of shelling the intermediate area, it would make it more difficult for the enemy to infiltrate behind the German lines; it would also reduce German losses from heavy enemy fire.

The division ordered the establishment of a continuous line. This, naturally, did not preclude the formation of strong points where necessary; the final aim was to establish a continuous connecting trench between the individual installations which could be reinforced with wire entanglements. Experience proved that the best results were obtained with this type of construction.



The division distributed its forces as follows: the 46th Infantry Regiment was committed on the right, the 453d Infantry Regiment in the center, and the 473d Infantry Regiment on the left; a battery consisting of two guns was attached to each regiment; the remainder of the division artillery was distributed to the sectors of the 453d and 473d Infantry Regiments. The other batteries which still had adequate personnel, as well as the men of the anti-tank battalion and of the separate horse-drawn columns, were quartered south and southwest of Mostovaya.

The division supply came by rail from Rzhev and was unloaded at Mostovaya. However, due to enemy shelling it was soon moved one mile farther east into the woods. The two afore-mentioned highways were the only arteries of traffic available for the division's supply. Distribution points were set up near the intersection of the railroad and the highway; division headquarters moved into a village about one mile south of the intersection.

The enemy had followed only slowly, and was weak and inactive especially on the northern front. The success of German assault troops on this front again raised the men's morale to some extent. However, by the end of January Nelidovo village and station, where other divisions had set up their supply installations during the advance, fell to the enemy. The division ordered the 473d Infantry Regiment to recapture Nelidovo, but the attempt failed and the enemy again stood at the division's unprotected flank, since the 246th Infantry Division which was to adjoin the 253d Infantry Division after advancing from Smolensk via Bely was unable to advance beyond Bely, and even had the greatest difficulty in holding the latter locality.

In the beginning of February the division had the 46th Infantry Regiment



and the 473d Infantry Regiment relieve each other and during this process withdrew a battalion from the 473d Infantry Regiment and held it in reserve.

Approximately six miles east of Nelidovo, at the point of intersection of the railroad and highway, was the village Karpovo. In its vicinity was the left wing of the 464th Infantry Regiment. A company had been dispatched halfway to Nelidovo to keep the Nelidovo - Bely highway under constant observation as a heavy flow of Russian traffic toward Bely had been observed. The company repelled several enemy raids, but was forced in the end to withdraw to Karpovo. Soon thereafter, the Russians advanced as far as the edge of the woods and established their artillery position there. An early enemy attack had to be expected at this point.

Despite its objections, the division was ordered to advance across the Luchesa valley and carry out a major operation against the Nelidovo - Bely highway to block Russian traffic. The mission was assigned to the reserve battalion of the 473d Infantry Regiment, reinforced by an engineer company and an anti-tank company. In its advance the battalion encountered the enemy in the Luchesa valley, drove him out of several villages, but was then hurriedly recalled by the division. The engineer company completed the mission under great difficulties; however, it succeeded in reaching the highway in one night, and interrupted the Russian traffic with mines and fire.

The reason for the withdrawal of the reserve battalion was the approach of a strong enemy force from Monino; this force advanced northeastward to Mostovaya and gradually forced back the German units there which were unaccustomed to ground fighting. The battalion arrived just in time to halt the enemy advance about six miles southwest of Mostovaya. Two heavy batteries and one 100-mm battery were moved into the area; the former were committed



north, the latter south of the railroad line southeast of Mostovaya. Another heavy battery was committed in the sector of the 464th Infantry Regiment. Gradually, a regimental headquarters and two Panzergrenadier battalions of the 1st Panzer Division were made available to the division and committed southwest of Mostovaya.

The threat to the division's left wing had hardly been removed when the anticipated enemy attack on Karpovo began. A Russian force of about twenty T-34 tanks broke into the village after overcoming the deep snow with surprising ease. This was the division's first encounter with this type of enemy tank. The regiment had no anti-tank weapons and was equipped only with a few anti-tank mines. One battery with two 105-mm guns, located in the western part of the village, combatted the tanks that came within its range, but was eventually overrun and destroyed. A temporary panic broke out in the village, but then the German troops rallied and hurled explosives charges from the houses, barns and basements, thus annihilating approximately half of the enemy force; the remnant withdrew into the woods. The enemy infantry, which could follow the tanks only slowly through the snow was annihilated. The regiment had achieved a complete defensive victory. However, during the following days the enemy continued his attacks and changed his tank tactics. The tanks halted in front of the German positions and neutralized the latter with their fire. The Luftwaffe joined the fighting, and its dive bombers broke up enemy assemblies in the woods. Nevertheless, the regiment was forced to fall back to the edge of the woods north of Karpovo; from this position it continued to repel the enemy attacks which became more and more violent. However, in the woods at its open flank in the direction of Mostovaya, the regiment had to resist continuous small and large-scale attacks by the enemy, whose strong ski troops frequently



seriously interfered with the German supply, even in positions far to the rear. Finally the enemy's main effort was shifted toward Mostovaya, into the area south of the railroad line. According to a captured Russian order, the enemy had committed three divisions adjacent to each other in a narrow sector and designated a stream area southeast of Mostovaya as the objective of the attack. On either side the railroad was adjoined by dense and sparsely populated woods which limited the field of fire. For weeks bitter counterattacks and defensive fighting raged in these woods. The Russians extended their operations into the southeast area of the woods, committing some tanks which gave the German troops much trouble. Gradually, the division employed all its available infantry, its engineer battalion, as well as the anti-tank and reconnaissance battalions by weakening its northern front. In addition, the headquarters and two understrength battalions of a regiment of the 110th Infantry Division were moved up. These elements counterattacked and drove back the enemy who had advanced north of the railroad to the vicinity of Mostovaya. The German lines west and south of Mostovaya were gradually pushed farther east, but the German troops resisted all enemy attempts at a breakthrough.

The difficult weeks of snow and ice demanded extremely great sacrifices from the German combat troops, who were deprived of proper winter clothing and regular supply. The German supply difficulties were increased by the fact that since early February the railroad line from Rzhev was continuously disrupted by local enemy penetrations. For weeks the division had to be supplied by air. The supply of guns, equipment and ammunition became precarious, especially for the heavy artillery which was lending very effective support to the infantry's defensive operations.

German losses were very high, compared to the diminished strength of the



combat units. For many weeks the wounded could only be evacuated by air.

The German troops performed above all praise. The division received a well-deserved citation on 27 March 1942 which stated: "In weeks of bitter fighting in Rhenish - Westphalian 253d Infantry Division has repelled 120 enemy attacks which had in part been supported by tanks, and has destroyed the main body of several Soviet divisions."

#### IV. Lessons Learned

##### Experiences in Winter Warfare

1. The division had only few motor vehicles. A small motor transport column was stationed near the intersection of the Mostovaya and Kholmets highway. This column rushed reinforcements from one front to the other, moved individual guns back and forth, and carried badly needed ammunition from the airfield. As a result, the conduct of battle depended largely on the condition of the main arteries of communication and on the speedy removal of snowdrifts.

2. Since the frozen ground did not permit digging in, parapets made of snow had to be constructed. The latter connected the positions and, if covered by a layer of ice or reinforced with timber, rendered the positions bullet proof to some extent. It was necessary also to paint the firearms white and camouflage their emplacements with white cloth or white-washed planks. Gun barrels also required a coat of white paint.

3. Initially, frozen machine guns also presented a major problem, since the anti-freeze was not available. However, it was soon discovered that the machine guns would function in extreme cold if they were not oiled after cleaning and were occasionally fired. Besides, the guns were not brought into



heated rooms but left under cover outdoors, ready for instant use. In sentry posts recesses were built into the parapets made of snow or the ground in which the guns were kept.

4. Special precautions also had to be taken to prevent the breaking down of radio equipment in severe cold.

5. In villages along the main roads heat and shelter were provided for troops on the march.

6. The air-cooled small personnel carriers (Volkswagen) proved very practical. On numerous occasions motor vehicles bogged down in the snow on the narrow roads when attempting to pass another vehicle. In these cases it required only a few men to get the Volkswagen back on the road. In removing long stretches of snowdrifts, frequently by-passes for motor vehicles had to be established.

7. Whenever understrength units have to defend a large sector, the commanders, from platoon up, should keep reserves on hand, even if only few selected men. During the Russian campaign such reserves were usually successful in launching an immediate counterattack against the vastly superior enemy with hand-grenades, and in driving him from the positions which he had penetrated.

8. Machine guns should be continuously switched to alternate positions, so that as soon as a gun has fired it moves to another position. This will deceive the enemy as to strength of the opposing force and prevent the destruction of the machine guns by enemy fire.