

The Crucible of Kursk

Hauptmann's Notes

Taylon Ritter, Hauptmann
6th Panzer Division
Panzerkampfwagen Tiger 432
Near Kharkov, Russia
8:00 a.m. August 23rd, 1943

We are fresh and ready, our battalion is confident, and all of us are prepared to avenge the 6th army. Stalingrad may have been their tomb, but Kursk will be the tomb for all of Russia. We have been suffering staggering losses, but the Reich will persevere. The Bolsheviks and their communist masters do not know how to fight; they send men to die in waves for no gain. I heard similar stories of the tactics of all nations in the first Great War, but I was a pup just barely ready to learn when my opportunity for glory ended back then. My men and I shall drive the knife into Stalin's very heart. I have a new crew under my command and I've been promoted to Hauptmann because of my actions in the opening battles. The uniform is crisp, intimidating, and draws the respect of all of the rank and file, I feel powerful.

The men adore me, I will use this to inspire them to greatness, I will yell above their heads to drive forward and be the image of a perfect officer! Kharkov will be the breakwater of the Russian's counter-attack, we will win out, and then we can take Kursk back completely. Winter had sapped most of our will to fight, but with my field promotion after Hauptmann Hinesburg was killed I will be this division's light. We will win, even if we have to play the Russians' game of attrition; our men will fight, die, and beat the communists back for Germany, for the Führer, for glory, for the Reich! I can and will command these men to stand and fight, they will beat the odds, they will not fail, they will stop the Russians or they will die.

German Forces: 8:00.m. August 23rd, 1943

The grass beneath the Hauptmann's feet was dead, having long since been denied the peace of not being marched across. All around the black wolf, in his crisp, black uniform, were tanks, their crew members, and the occasional foot soldier curious to hear the day's plans. All of assembled crews were veterans of the Russian campaign, each bearing a scar, demeanor, or quiet that spoke of the horrors they'd seen, the glory they'd earned, and the thrill of operating the modern battlefield's greatest weapon.

Standing directly in front of the Hauptmann, just a few feet away, were an assembled four men of various height, age, and species. A St. Bernard stood to the Hauptmann's far left, followed by a black German shepherd, another Grey Wolf but of different color, and then finally a fox, seemingly out of place amongst the gathered canines at the front of the motor pool. Behind the four men in line was a black hulking outline of a newly minted Tiger tank, almost fresh off the assembly line and newly appointed to the Hauptmann, along with his crew. The rest of the assembled men stood before Panzer IV's and two other Tiger tanks, fresh off their delivery cars and fit for combat.

The black wolf stepped forward amongst the crowd of men all standing at attention, "Men! Your former Hauptmann is dead, he lost his life fighting for his country."

The wolf's hand scanned out across the gathered crewman.

"You all fight under my command now. Your obedience and utmost commitment to duty are not just mandated, they are required."

Again the wolf moved, this time to turn and stare out over the expansive and barren landscape of the battlefields near Kharkov.

"You are going to operate at your combat best and not an ounce less. You are going to bring glory to the Reich, glory to this division, and glory to yourselves. We will go down in history as the hunter who shot the bear just in time for its corpse to come to a halt at our feet. You will get in your Panzers and slaughter these Russians that seek the crush Germany.

The Hauptmann turned back to face the men with his fist clenched and raised before him.

"The day will be ours, this battle will be ours, Russia will be ours!"

Around the wolf all of the tankers raised their hands in an imitated gesture, 74 fists pumping outwards and forwards amidst cheers and "Hoo-rahs!"

"Now! See to your duties," The clenched hand loosened and pointed at and over the group of men assembled in front of the other two tiger tanks. "except for you men and my crew, you stay here."

The Hauptmann retracted his hands, clutching them together behind his waist as all of the men in front of him knocked their heels together and saluted sharply before turning around to speed off to their armored charges. The jet-black wolf walked past his own four assembled crew members, he came to a stop just between them and the group of ten men responsible for operating the other two Tigers. In front of the group of Tiger 243 stood a bat by the name of Femukki Klein, a purple bat, but that was not the most astonishing feature of the commander; the most astonishing feature was that of her chest. She was indeed a “she”, a female Leutnant and commander of Tiger 243; she looked no less out of place than the commander to her right. On Femukki’s right, in front of the other Tiger’s group, stood a husky with a large scar across his left eye. The dog’s white coloring stood in stark contrast to the black of the Hauptmann looking over him as well as that of the black of his own uniform. The husky, Rommel Nein, carried himself like an officer and stood straightest at attention of all three Tiger crews, he reminded the Hauptmann of himself. The wolf made a mental note that the man would go far, especially if he commanded Tiger 323 with the skill with which High Command had said of him.

The wolf spoke out loud but to no one in particular. “Wolfsrudel Platoon... That is our name. A wolf pack, which is what you will all be under my command.”

The wolf’s right hand unlatched from behind his waist and gestured to the other Grey Wolf amongst his own crew.

“Sven here, and myself were raised in them.”

The wolf strolled lazily in a circle between the two groups, gesturing strongly with fists, pointed claws, and bared fangs.

“Packs are strong, loyal, efficient, and structured. This all leads to consistent success in taking down prey larger than Sven or I could do alone. Do you know what kind of prey we’re hunting today Wolfsrudel Platoon?!”

The bat in front of Tiger 243 stood straighter and puffed her chest out. “A bear, sir!!!”

Hauptmann Ritter grinned viciously at his ‘pack-mate’. “That is correct Leutnant Klein. Today we are hunting a bear. This bear is much larger than us, thinks it can overpower us with its sheer bulk, its weight, its size. Leutnant Nein, do you know why the bear will lose to a pack of wolves?”

The husky straightened up to his maximum height and only turned his head to face the Hauptmann. “Because it is outnumbered by the amount of superior canines biting at its weakest points, sir.”

The wolf looked down just a bit and chuckled. “A very propaganda-inspired answer Leutnant, but no. Our numbers mean nothing against this bear, the bear will lose because it is picking a

fight with a pack that will outlast it, outmaneuver it, and far outclass its simple and stupid tactics.”

The assembled men, and one woman, all smiled at the Hauptmann’s words and entwined insults pointed at their enemy. “Remember, there is structure in the pack, that is why it works, and every member is taken care of. You listen to me, you don’t disobey me, and you don’t take a bite of our meal until I say so. Got that?”

The 14 assembled Tiger crewmembers all saluted and stood at attention. “Yes, Hauptmann, sir!”

“Good, now see that you’re all ready to go in an hour, no excuses.”

The crews of Tigers 243 and 323 all turned and went about double-checking their respective tanks as the Hauptmann turned to face his own crew.

The wolf stared out from underneath his cap, the cold grey of his eyes making sure to lock with the pupils of all four of his crewmen. “You all heard correctly, right? We are brothers, we are pack-mates, a team, a well-oiled machine. I already know Mr. Faust well, but the rest of you are new, introduce yourselves.”

The youngest of the four, the German shepherd, spoke up first. “I am Nicholas Klauss, Hauptmann, your radio operator, sir.”

The shepherd saluted and the wolf nodded acknowledgement. “Good to meet you Nicholas, you are the lifeblood of this platoon as much as our tanks’ fuel. You will glue yourself to that radio when I tell you to and coordinate with all elements above and beyond your reported abilities, yes?”

“Yes, Hauptmann Ritter, sir!”

“Good, when we’re done here, see to your duties, we expect the Russian attack in less than an hour.”

The next figure stepped up, the fox who looked none out of place among his canine crewmates. “Eckart Brandt, sir, the best loader Germany can offer.”

“I’m sure you are Mr. Brandt, but I have not seen your skills exercised in combat. I will be the judge of your claims when the time comes.”

The fox saluted, stepped back into line, and the St. Bernard stepped forward to take his place.

“And what do we have here?” The wolf said cocking his head and grinning. “You might just be the most well fed soldier I’ve seen in this war so far Mr.?”

“Aegerter, sir. Serge Aegerter, and I know I may look it but this is mostly my coat. I was born in the Swiss Alps, thick coats are a necessity, sir. I am your gunner, an expert one at that.”

The wolf chuckled lightly again. "It would seem Germany has graced me with a crew of experts and best-in-their-classes. How could I be so lucky?"

The wolf's smile fell away as fast as it had parted his snout. "You too will have to prove your worth Serge, and if I find you lacking I will not hesitate to replace you."

The Bernard saluted and then stepped back in line with the fox and shepherd, looking a bit intimidated but also surprisingly pleased by the speech given to him.

The last of the four didn't step up to the Hauptmann, instead the Gray Wolf stood in place and just wryly grinned at his commander.

The Hauptmann coughed and glared at the other wolf, but he didn't budge.

The black wolf stamped his boot and walked up to the other wolf until their snouts almost touched, uncomfortably close. The Hauptmann screamed, "Damnit Sven, will you never learn respect! The rest of you, familiarize yourself with Tiger 432, make sure you know her every inch. I'm going to see that Mr. Faust here remembers his place in this pack"

The Hauptmann pointed to his quarters, snarled, and seemed to venomously whisper into Sven's ear. The older Gray Wolf's brown and grey ears flattened to his head and he marched towards the Hauptmann's quarters. Hauptmann Ritter followed quickly behind with a snarl on his face and quickness in his step. Back in front of Tiger 432 the three remaining crew members conversed and got to know each other a bit better.

Serge watched the two wolves go, and as canines are apt to do, cocked his head amidst his curiosity. "What do you think Hauptmann Ritter is going to do?"

The fox placed a shell on its side on top of 432's track guard. "Probably write him up for insubordination and cut his rations."

Nicholas chimed in next, "That's the seventh time I've seen Sven defy the Hauptmann. That many insubordinations has got to have added up to something by now."

Serge nodded and spotted an opportunity in the boy tinkering with his radio's demure personality. "Seven has to be close to being court marshaled. Strange, Sven was smiling up until the Hauptmann's threats, maybe Sven just doesn't know when to quit. Oh, hey, Nicholas was it?"

"Yes sir, Leutnant Aegerter."

"Would you mind finding me some coffee? I've got to calibrate the gun's sights."

"Sure thing, Serge." And with that, the shepherd scurried off to search the ransacked mess hall.

German Forces: 9:10a.m. August 23rd, 1944

Assembled along the middle of the hill that the German defense had fortified was Wolfsrudel Platoon. The three Tigers sat relatively close to each other, around 80 feet of space in between each Tiger, with no threat of air attack the Hauptmann had chosen optimum defensive positions. At the bottom of the hill wedged formations of three Panzer IV's, each platoon of them, were placed behind respective trenches and field guns. This guaranteed open firing lines and sight to the Russian direction of advance, especially with the superior 88's range and power able to rain down fire from the Tigers' elevated position. The assembled German defense had been sitting and waiting for 40 minutes now. There wasn't a sign of the Russian advance other than the forward observation report that had come in and warned them at 7:45a.m. Not a soul stirred on the lifeless plains of the slightly rolling hills.

The defenders became anxious at the lack of activity, but soon enough their repose was broken. A multitude of German binoculars all settled on this distant rustle of leaves, the trails of light-smoke rising into the air, and the tide of brown and red jacketed soldiers. There were multiple thousands marching in the direction of just 800 German defenders. The bear was just as massive as the Hauptmann had made it out to be, a veritable tide of enemy soldiers and Panzers. Behind the assembled thousands of Russian fighters was a line of 30 T-34 tanks. Ten platoons of mechanized death and over 3,000 Russian soldiers were ready to steamroll the Hauptmann's position and take the advance on Kharkov he was protecting. Their intentions known, no one was expecting the tide to stop, and just as expected, it didn't, it only drew closer. The sea-like blob of grey and red coats started to disperse and form almost tendril-like attack groups that sped towards to German lines.

The Hauptmann's eyes were glued to 432's rangefinder. "Enemy armor at maximum effective range. Serge, elevate gun to compensate, fire when loaded and ready."

From the front of 432's hull came the shouts and orders of Nicholas, his commands acted as a beacon and the turrets and barrels of all 15 German Panzers turned to face the onslaught.

432's breach clamped shut with a loud clack, her brand new metal shining gloriously from her well oiled barrel's rear. "Round up"

The Bernard yelled, "Shot out!"

432's bulk shook as her barrel recoiled, spitting 88 millimeters of death. Seconds passed and then a half mile away from the German lines a T-34 exploded open like a paper bag trying to hold back a lit M-80.

Seconds later there was another shot as 432 picked off the next T-34's at a seemingly-ludicrous distance. The other 14 tanks all poured shells into the advancing tide moving from tree to tree, rock to boulder, hill to hill. The bear stood on its hind legs, towering over the defending wolves.

German Forces: 11:10a.m. August 23rd, 1944

Two hours of bloodshed, two hours of death, two hours of hell on Earth. Thousands were dead, thousands more still fought. Of the valiant defenders only 380 soldiers remained manning their lines and only eight German tanks still fought back with gouts of flame and smoke. The initial swipe of the bear's claws had been vicious, lines were overrun, and soldiers were murdered with knives, rocks, and close range gunfire. Eventually the Germans beat back the initial push with assistance of newly implemented Flammenwerfers given to a few infantry platoons. The directed and searing fire was wielded by madmen who laughed as their enemy's flesh was crumpled to black and their lives were violently engulfed by the remorseless flames. With positions regained the Germans once again assembled a line of coordinated defense and lanes of gunfire.

Tiger 432 had been focusing on Russian armor, she already had ten tanks to her name in just two hours; 432's barrel was tracking a pair of T-34's advancing on a stranded Panzer. A retreating Panzer IV and her wounded commander had broken down just forward of the German trenches, having tank-shocked underequipped Russian soldiers from their positions with its metal bulk and then been immobilized by a grenade. The human commander of the Panzer IV shouted for help as two T-34's closed in on him. Like divine intervention Hauptmann Ritter and his crew smote both Russian tanks, each in one fell swoop of providence and exceptional skill.

Arnulf Arden, the human commander of the wounded Panzer IV cried with joy into his microphone, praising the crew of 432 and repeatedly singing the tank's name as "Jägerwolf, the hunter of hunters."

There seemed to be no end to the bear's hubris. Even as it was bitten and weakened it would only halt in its attack for a time and then come right back in for more. The stupid beast never learned its lesson, even as fire licked at its hands and wolves bit into its armored hide it still advanced. Six T-34's, in two platoons of three tanks each came barreling straight towards the German lines at full speed, not taking time to aim so much as hold the throttle open more. Standing from the cupola of the left platoon was a Siberian Tiger of golden pelt and vivid hair. She screamed at the charging soldiers her tank blazed past, shouting and yelling at them to charge with her and her armored steeds. Just in back of her platoon another platoon was only seconds behind. Popped up from that platoon's lead tank was a brown bat. The bat's gigantic ears were snugly fit inside his tanker cap and the creature known for being poor in sight proved otherwise as he coordinated with his platoon and the tiger's. Together the tiger, Tamara Ivanova, and the bat, Vladimar Aleeksev, would sound a death knell for the defending forces.

The two brazen tank commanders and their platoons did not stop to fight at the German trenches, they just continued forward. Tamara's platoon lost a tank to fire from 432, Vladimar losing a T-34 as well to a Pak anti-tank gun. Two tanks wasn't a crushing loss as the four remaining T-34's penetrated the German's defense so far that the way was open for full chaos.

With four T-34's in the middle of their lines, Wolfsrudel platoon could not fire on the tanks without risking harm to other German forces. This plan had proved the best choice made by the bear in its losing fight so far. Close range shots from the two penetrated platoons started making short work of field guns facing the wrong direction and Panzer IV's oblivious to the enemy's extreme proximity. Confusion was sewn in the German lines; the bear's claws reached out once more and the German trenches were again drowned in a flood of brown and red coats.

Hauptmann Ritter was quickly looking from failing defense point to the next, the wolf's eyes never occupied one viewing window of his cupola for more than a couple seconds.

"Serge, target nearest T-34 in our lines, adjust elevation down 40 degrees and rotate turret 20 degrees right!"

The wolf sat back down inside 432's turret and pointed to his radioman. "Nicholas, fire into the center trenches, they are lost!"

"Hauptmann, sir, there are still men down there!"

The wolf looked scornfully towards the bit of the Shepherd he could see from the turret. "Would you rather they die quickly by our bullets or bleed to death with Russian knives in their chest and back?!"

"But sir, they're still fighting, they're--"

Hauptmann Ritter slammed his fist on the empty shell-rack to his right. "I said 'FIRE' Nicholas! That means fire your fucking weapon! You do NOT question me!"

The shepherd didn't answer in words, he only held his tongue and shouldered the hull machinegun at his station inside 432; the telltale buzzsaw zip of MG42 fire soon echoed throughout 432's insides.

"Enemy panzer in sight, Hauptmann"

The wolf rubbed over his sore fist with his free hand. "Fire!"

Another of Tamara's T-34's erupted in fire, leaving just her own, Vladimir's, and Vladimir's other remaining platoonmate. This was soon rectified by the Germans as Tigers 243 and 323 both massacred Vladimir's platoon, Tamara's T-34 the only one now left still rumbling and alive amidst the German lines. Their gesture had not been in vain though, the confusion and halt in coordinated fire from Wolfsrudel platoon that the rushing tanks had caused was the final stroke in the bears claw-swipes. Despite only Tamara's tank remaining in their lines, ten T-34's still roamed the outer lines and only grew closer, compared to the German's three Tigers and one stranded Panzer IV. Arnulf Arden and his crew had run out of ammunition for their main gun, the crew popped their hatches and started shooting at the tide of Russians with their sidearms, a fruitless gesture as the bear's nearest tendril engulfed their tank in brown and red coats.

Hauptmann Ritter watched from his cupola as Arnulf was pulled from his tank by the murderous hands of the bear's minions. So rare a creature in these lands, pulled down and no doubt torn to pieces; the wolf shook his head in regret, another precious human life lost.

The wolf ordered his crew to further acts of vengeance and capricious bloodlust. Halfway up the hill the Tigers were immune to the fire of the T-34's down the hill. The three German masterpieces rained down hell; tanks turned into scrap metal with each recoil of an 88mm barrel, 18 kills to 432's name already today, and two to each of the other Tiger platoon's tanks, the smaller number made up for by the countless scores of soldiers killed by 432's packmates' high explosive shells.

The German lines were lost; they faltered completely and retreated away from the towering stature of the bear. Hauptmann Ritter watched through his cupola as his hasty defense fell, he could see the agony on the faces of the soldiers bleeding out on the soil of a foreign land, so far from home. There were just too many, he had expected maybe 1500 and a few T-34's, not over 3000 men and twice his amount of Panzers. The sight was sobering, hundreds under his command perished and were trampled into the dirt of a nation Germany had claimed inferior and dangerous, a country they had attacked without warning. A country whose soldiers fought with the viciousness of men and woman in danger of losing their homes and livelihoods. The Hauptmann's chest tightened, he watched as six fearful soldiers holding their hands in surrender were either shot, stabbed, or brutally beaten to death with rifle butts by the Russian attackers. Watching the ferocity with which his enemy fought finally cleared Hauptmann Ritter of his last remnants of blind hubris. Those thousands down there, probably only ¾ of them equipped with guns, the rest fighting with knife, fang and claw; they were defending their homeland from the unprovoked viciousness and crimes of war of the Germans, the same characteristics Teylon had been told the Russians were going to lay upon Germany when operation Barbarossa began.

The wolf looked down to his hands and knees, whispering into the spacious belly of 432. "We weren't fighting to protect Germany, we started this for the pride of the Führer"

Serge turned around to look at the wolf while Eckart reloaded. "What's that sir?"

The wolf looked up with conviction in his eyes and snarled. "Sven, move us forward, we need to keep the Russians off our boys."

"Yes sir, motor to 350 ps."

432 lurched forward and down the hill, her treads making a mockery of the semi-flat surface of the hill that so many red-blooded German men scrambled up to escape.

"Sir, what are we doing?!" Eckart shouted back at the Hauptmann.

"We're moving up to draw the Bolsheviks' attention, we need to get our men out of here."

The crew members, minus Sven, all looked towards the Hauptmann with slight but sure-spirited smiles, they were going to do their utmost to save their brothers.

Nicholas' voice crackled in Taylon's ear. "Hauptmann Ritter sir, the Generalfeldmarschall has ordered a full retreat, we're leaving Kursk to the Russians"

The wolf clenched his hands around each other. "We're not leaving these men behind."

The voice of an all too familiar voice replaced Nicholas' in the Hauptmann's headset; that of a thickheaded, bigoted, and pompous Belgian shepherd. "With respect *Hauptmann* Ritter, your promotion by me only puts your ear that much closer to my lips. You *will* be retreating now, not later. You and your crew have proved your worth to be that much more than the men dying for Germany at the bottom of that forsaken hill. I will not have your three perfect soldiers thrown away. That's an order, Hauptmann."

Hauptmann Ritter rested forward onto his knees inside 432, he knew better than to fight with his commander and still expect to serve the Fatherland. "Understood, sir. Sven, full reverse. We're leaving Kharkov and Kursk to the Russians."

The Hauptmann stood up in his cupola and looked to the couple hundred men still fighting at the bottom of the hill. He watched them die, abandoned by the nation and leaders they fought for. Wolfsrudel platoon started rolling backwards, the three Tigers fired sporadically when shots presented themselves but their impact was minimal and didn't impart any reprisal on their numerous foes for their transgressions. Eventually the three tanks crested the hill and disappeared from sight just as the sun dropped behind a patch of clouds. At the bottom of the Earthen mound hundreds of cowering Russians rose up with renewed vigor, the black monster and its sister tanks had fallen back. The dealers of death that they had watched snuff the lives of so many comrades with brutal and inhuman efficiency, were gone. Those terrible grim reapers were gone, no doubt running home to their Reich. Tamara climbed from her cupola amidst the slaughter of the German defenders, no quarter was given to any German she spotted amongst her brown-and-red-clad brethren. The tiger surveyed the destruction, only eight tanks left amongst the 30 she had been a part of. She slumped down and sat on the back hull of her tank looking over to Vladimar's wrecked tank, then to the fields of thousands of dead, and finally her eyes went from each destroyed tank husk to the next, surveying the sheer carnage just five men had managed to play out on their tank company.

The tiger eased the terrible tension in her chest as losing so many friends. Her driver popped his hatch and called out to her, "Tamara, are you alright?"

She answered in a slow and solemn voice, imparted by the bodies, smoke, and blood she looked out over. "Those men were monsters, they were not soldiers, they were demons conjured from the blackest hole Germany has unearthed in its conquest. And I fear..." she paused to breathe deeply, "... I fear this is not the last we have seen of them."

Seven days later Hauptmann Ritter and his crew were at battle on another Russian field, covering a perpetual fallback for an entire week had been grueling, but their grim toll was still rising. Any field the newly christened Jägerwolf was spotted on was avoided by Russian armor like the plague. Every time they had tried to corner and kill 432 it would kill them back en masse and then slip through their fingers to only be spotted fighting days later and leagues away.

Tamara Ivanova found herself accompanying the displaced Russian government, directly reporting to the Soviet military leadership on just what had played out on the 23rd. Her words cautioned any action against the becoming-infamous crew of Tiger 432 without a surefire way to corner them for good. She was told that the noose was tightening on 432 and indeed all of Germany, soon enough a Western front would open up and the Atlantic wall would fall.

End part 3

. Hope you all enjoyed the read into the crew's past! There will be no signups for part 4 as it is a continuation of part 2. Make sure to read the rules for future signups! :3

-Dark