

# TAC NEWS

May-June 1997

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## BREAKTHROUGH AT BALTA, AUGUST 1941



**I**n the early Fifties, the United States Army published a series of pamphlets chronicling the Wehrmacht's battle experience against the Red Army in World War Two. Each pamphlet dealt with a specific aspect of Eastern Front combat and was intended to prepare American soldiers for the then likely event of a "hot" war against the Soviet Union. The following scenario was drawn from the pamphlet *Small Unit Actions During the German Campaign in Russia*.

When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June of 1941, its forces were divided into three army groups: North, Center, and South. As the right wing of Army Group South, Eleventh Army constituted the southernmost extremity of the invasion force. Eleventh Army's immediate strategic objective was the Black Sea port of Odessa. Some 120 miles northwest of Odessa, along Eleventh Army's axis of advance stood the town of Balta. Balta had strategic importance by virtue of its highway bridge which spanned the Kodyma River. The Germans hoped to seize the bridge by *coup de main*, but as they approached Balta the bridge disintegrated in a spectacular explosion.

Balta was heavily fortified and determinedly manned. Over the next two days, its battalion-sized garrison held, forcing Eleventh Army to switch gears. The Rumanian 6th and the German 239th Infantry Divisions were ordered to envelope Balta from the west and east. The German 744th Engineer Regiment, supported by a Rumanian screening force, would attack Balta directly from the north and root out the defenders with flamethrowers and demolition charges. With this accomplished, the engineers would replace the demolished bridge with a 24-ton highway pontoon. H Hour was set for 0400 hours on August 3.

The 744th was a corps asset, not all of its strength was available for the direct assault of Balta. Temporarily attached to the 239th Infantry Division was the 744th's C Company, Lieutenant Ehrhardt commanding. C Company was a veteran unit recently brought up to full-strength. It supported the 239th Division's flanking move by rebuilding a partially demolished vehicular bridge across the Kodyma roughly 1 mile east of Balta.

As the assault commenced, 239th Division's lead elements encountered heavy artillery fire, but little direct

resistance. The division's advance was swift and within hours its supply train was streaming across the Kodyma on the repaired vehicular bridge. With its mission accomplished, C Company stood down as it waited for new orders.

Ehrhardt sought news of his regiment. He questioned a field phone section returning from the far bank. The linemen reported taking fire from the wooded hills north of Balta and from a sunflower field to the east. The only "friendlies" in the area were Rumanian infantry retreating to the north. Something was wrong. This was the sector assigned to the 744th. Had it been repulsed? Unknown to Ehrhardt, the 744th had been bombed in its assembly area and was only now reaching its jump-off position. Word of the delay had not been passed to the Rumanians. They attacked on time and were repulsed.

Ehrhardt weighed his options. If the 744th had been repulsed, his tiny bridgehead as well as the right flank of the 239th Division, was now open to direct attack from Balta. He could play it safe and dig in around the little bridge, but if forced off the south bank his force was ill-equipped to trade punches across a river.

especially if the Soviets had tanks. However, if the enemy garrison was now focused north, it might be vulnerable to a bold attack from the east. In street fighting, the engineer's specialized weapons would even the odds regardless of Soviets assets.

The plan was a calculated risk, with an extremely narrow window of opportunity. To delay and wait while the plan was run up and down the command chain would surely allow the Soviets time to redeploy. Ehrhardt thus decided to attack on his own initiative.

After relaying his plan to the divisional staff of the 239th and the regimental headquarters of the 744th by motorcycle messenger, Ehrhardt gathered his three platoon commanders. Each one was given a specific reconnaissance mission. Lt. Kuehne's 1st Platoon would dispatch a patrol to cover the area behind the main road and river. A three-man detail from 2nd Platoon would reconnoiter the southern river bank to the southeastern section of town. A patrol from 3rd Platoon was assigned the sunflower field. Each patrol's objective was to determine enemy dispositions along the eastern outskirts of Balta and a feasible assault route. Each patrol would report by messenger and remain in place to support the company's advance.

At 0635, two Soviet light tanks emerged from Balta heading east towards C Company's vehicular bridge. As the

tanks skirted the sunflower field, they were stopped by a hasty mine barrier laid by 3rd Platoon. A sharp firefight ensued. The engineers, covered by the tall plants, launched a close-assault with captured Soviet frangible grenades. One tank, soused in chemical smoke, lurched into soft ground and bogged. At this moment, a German horse-drawn howitzer battery from the 239th blundered into the fight. Both tanks turned their turrets onto the column and shot it up. The gunners quickly unlimbered and returned fire over open sights. The bogged tank blew up on the second direct hit. The surviving tank withdrew back into the city.

As it turned out, the engagement's principal dividend was not one dead enemy tank. The battery CO was on a tight timetable. Now short on horses, he was forced to abandon one of his howitzers. Ehrhardt requested this piece be attached to his command for the upcoming battle. The battery commander consented, providing C Company supplied the forward observer and necessary telephone cable. As Ehrhardt started to brief the crew chief, he heard heavy weapons fire north of Balta. The 744th assault, although three hours late, was right on Ehrhardt's timetable. The back door to Balta, although not wide open, was now certainly ajar.

A messenger from Lt. Kuehne arrived escorting a prisoner. The man reported his patrol captured this sentry just north of the river and established itself in a

farmhouse on the southeast corner of Balta. The messenger also gave the positions of 2nd and 3rd Platoon's recon parties. The area was defended, but the scouts were undetected. Lt. Kuehne also pinpointed a blind spot. The farmhouse stood at the end of a brush covered depression running north from the river. The depression could cover the company's advance and it was surrounded by marshy terrain ill-suited for tanks.

On the basis of Lt. Kuehne's report, Ehrhardt issued these verbal orders:

1. Company C would occupy jump-off positions on the outskirts of Balta. The first phase of the attack would seize the southern edge of town, including the main bridge site. Immediately establish a defensive line facing north in an effort to cut off enemy forces that might attempt to withdraw to the south once the regiment began its attack.

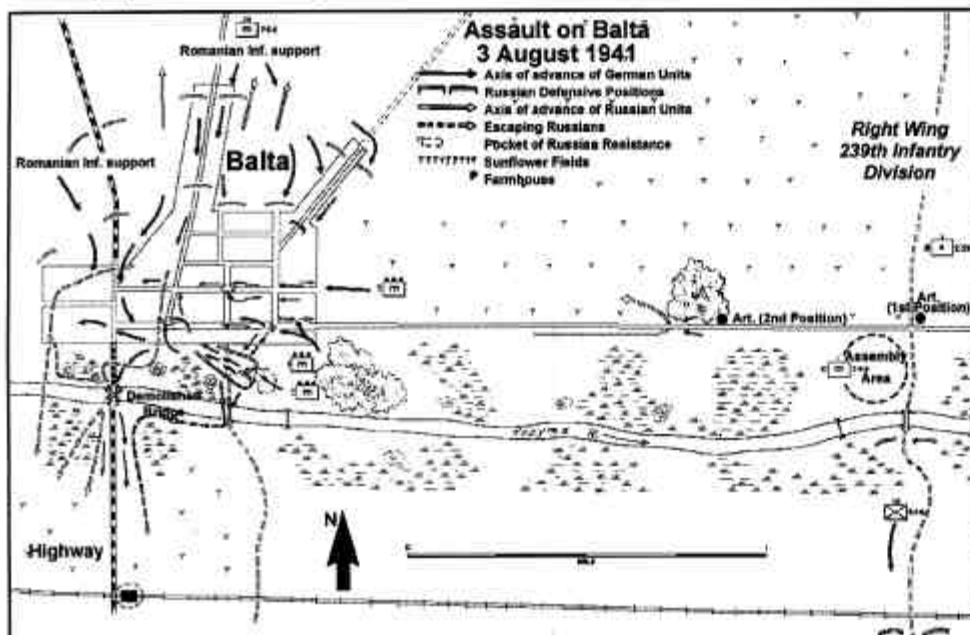
2. Missions:

- a. The 1st Platoon with the 2nd following at a distance of about 200 yards will advance to within a 100 yards of Balta.
- b. The 3rd Platoon will approach Balta through the sunflower field and close up to within of 100 yards of the objective. This platoon would divert the enemy's attention from the movements of the other platoons.
- c. The howitzer crew would place direct fire on the houses on the outskirts of the town. White tracers may also be used for target designation.

3. Signal flares were to be used:

- White: "We are here"
- Green: "We are attacking"
- Red: "Help needed"

By 0740 the entire company was in motion. At 0820, Ehrhardt established his CP in the farmhouse with a functioning phone line to the howitzer. Kuehne further briefed Ehrhardt. His platoon had spotted a heavy machine and mortar position, these coordinates were relayed to the howitzer crew. A 76.2mm gun (a much feared dual-purpose artillery piece the Germans called the "crash boom") was also pinpointed behind a barricade on the main street some 250 yards from the eastern edge of town. Ehrhardt told the



artillery chief to concentrate first on the "crash boom" and then the machine gun. Within ten minutes the howitzer reported ready. All was progressing exactly as planned. Suddenly, ten Soviet soldiers emerged from a nearby thicket and nonchalantly walked toward the farmhouse. A quick volley wiped them out, but the cat was out of the bag. Ehrhardt ordered the howitzer to open fire.

The first shell burst directly on the barricade. The Soviet gun crew hurriedly pivoted their piece and got off a blind shot. With the advantage of a forward observer, the German howitzer quickly ended the gun duel with a fourth round direct hit. The howitzer then shifted to the stone building housing the heavy machine gun. Within minutes this structure collapsed, imploded by delayed action shells. Before the dust settled, 1st Platoon rushed forward. Covered by machine gun bursts, assault teams hosed Soviet strong points with flamethrowers and finished them with demo charges.

Shock carried the first objectives, but the Soviets did not panic. With the advantage of terrain and numbers, they soon rallied and reestablished a cohesive line. First Platoon stalled. Third Platoon, knowing their comrades were in trouble, left the sunflower field to lend direct support. With Soviet machine gun fire sweeping the streets, 3rd Platoon opted to advance directly from building to building by blowing paths through adjacent walls. This proved effective until the assault party touched off a mine placed in their path.

2nd Platoon's toehold in Balta was brief. Short one squad, which had been left behind to guard the light bridge, the platoon was counterattacked by the Soviets in company-strength. The platoon was pushed back to its jump-off point. Several red flares popped over the thicket area and Ehrhardt ordered the howitzer to lend support. The combination of indirect artillery and the heavy organic firepower of a German combat engineer platoon forced the Soviets to break off the attack.

This battle held the makings of a first class disaster. Most of the company

was now bogged down in a vicious house-to-house fight. Second Platoon, caught in the open, faced annihilation. For Ehrhardt, retreat was

out of the question. The tanks would run his company down before they made the river. To simply dig in and await relief meant the sacrifice of 2nd Platoon. Characteristically, Ehrhardt chose an aggressive course of action. He ordered 1st and 3rd Platoons to disengage. Two-man fire teams were left on each intersection, keeping up a steady fire to mask the move. Once out of Balta, 1st and 3rd Platoons were deployed to enfilade the Soviet right when they ventured out to destroy 2nd Platoon. This was a tremendous gamble. If the Soviets did not break, the bait Ehrhardt dangled could easily become an appetizer, with his company as the main course. In that case, the Soviets would surely sweep on to capture his vehicular bridge and any rear echelon element of the 239th that happened to be near it.

The Soviets swept eastward to finish off the exposed Germans in the sunflowers. They were cut down by a pre-plotted volley of MG34 fire. Before this shock wore off, the startled survivors were taken by quick "bayonet" charge of flamethrower fire and hurled demo charges. Soviets that did not immediately surrender, sought shelter by the river where they were gunned down by 2nd Platoon's three-man recon detail. Within thirty minutes it was over. Ehrhardt's gamble proved a master stroke, for it simultaneously saved 2nd Platoon and secured an unshakable grip on southern Balta.

At 0945 Ehrhardt issued the following orders:

1. To exploit the initial success, occupy the main street up to the highway intersection, thereby severing Soviet routes of withdrawal to the south. The 1st Platoon will push on through the main street and occupy the intersection up to the highway.
2. The 2nd Platoon secured the north bank between the footbridge and the



highway bridge site to prevent Russian forces south of the river from entering the town.

3. The 3rd Platoon strengthened its positions inside the town and sent out a combat patrol to probe northward and seek early contact with their regiment.

4. The howitzer zeroed in on the ford, the bridge site, and the highway intersection.

C Company lacked the necessary strength to execute these orders. Squad-sized enemy detachments along with a few tanks escaped to the south. At 1100, lead elements of the 744th linked up with Ehrhardt. After a brief round of congratulations, C Company set about clearing mines on the site designated for the pontoon bridge.

## CONCLUSION

By audaciously securing a toehold in the enemy rear, Ehrhardt no doubt diverted attention away from his regiment's main assault and saved countless German casualties. The editor of the US Army's pamphlet justifiably praised Ehrhardt's initiative, thorough preparation, and concise orders. Ironically, the editor failed to comment on Soviet conduct. The nameless garrison commander is deserving of praise. With a reinforced infantry battalion, he denied a bridge and checked a corps for almost three days.

Critical analysis of the action at Balta also highlights two points that foreshadowed the eventual German defeat in the east. First, although the Soviet garrison was pocketed, it was not annihilated. Men and material were permitted to escape. Secondly, in this battle Red Army peasant regulars proved equal to highly-trained German specialists in urban combat. Thus, in a microcosm, Balta foretold the great disaster awaiting the *Wehrmacht* at Stalingrad.

By Edward Morris



# 744th Engineer Battalion (Reinforced)

## Engineer Kompanie (horse-drawn) 1939

### HQ

1 officer & 7 men



## Engineer Platoon

### HQ

1 officer  
5 men



## Engineer Squad

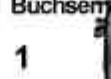
LMG



Flame  
Thrower



Panzer  
Büchsen



1 officer  
14 enlisted men

## Attached Romanian Infantry Support



±12

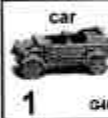
vary numbers  
to balance  
scenario

A & B Kompanies were horse-drawn; C Kompanie was motorized

## Engineer Kompanie (motorized) 1939

### HQ

1 officer & 7 men



## Engineer Platoon

### HQ

1 officer  
5 men



## Engineer Squad

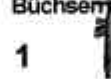
LMG



Flame  
Thrower



Panzer  
Büchsen



1 officer  
14 enlisted men

## Attached Artillerie (horse-drawn)

sFH m. 18



1

1 gun crew  
1 FO Officer w/  
field phone  
section



# Balta Defense Force

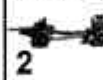
## Rifle Battalion 1940

### HQ

4 officers

## Artillery Section

37mm ATG



Lt Mortar



Transport



## Signal Platoon

Bicycle



Transport



## HMG Company

HMG  
Platoon



Transport



## Rifle Company

### HQ



MG

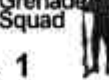


## Rifle Platoon

Rifle  
Squads



Rifle  
Grenade  
Squad



Transport



## Attached 76mm Gun Section (horse-drawn)

76mm Howitzer



Horses



Transport



from Div. Gun BN

## Tank Support

from  
Corps

BT-5

