

## BATTLEFIELD WALKAROUND

### 1. PANTHER LINE—ARMY GROUP NORTH 1944 (version 1.1)

**1.1 Locale**—By early 1944, Army Group North held a front that bore the marks of previous battles; a long line built around Leningrad. Of course, STAVKA's Baltic Front planners were determined to break the hold and finally free the city. 1943 ended with Army Group North facing the Russian Third Shock Army. Fighting had continued unabated through a muddy fall, and on into the month of December. Although the Germans had successfully held their front, the fighting power of *Armee Gruppe Nord* had been greatly reduced. The dead and wounded *landsers* were replaced by Latvian, Estonian, and Spanish soldiers. When OKW pulled the 5th Mountain Division out of the line, without a replacement, the time had come for a shortening of the front. The result became known as the 'Panther Line'.

The Panther Line itself was roughly 300 miles long, its north flank hinged on the Baltic Sea. About 100 miles of the line, was flanked by Lake Peipus in the center, a perfect obstacle in non-winter months. Construction of emplacements began on 7 September 1943, and included 20 miles of tank obstacles, 22 miles of wire, and numerous road bridges. A large number of steel and concrete shelters, as well as gun emplacements were also built. Key points were protected by anti-tank trenches. While construction ensued, Hitler and his generals argued over the timing of a withdrawal. The enemy would eventually choose the timing for the German dictator and his generals.

The East Prussian 121st Infantry Division held a portion of the front ringing Leningrad. Rated a 'Category II' division at the time the unit joined the 18th Army (part of Army Group North), in the fall of 1943. Its Order of Battle consisted of the 405th, 407th and 408th Infantry Regiments, Artillery Regiment 121 (105mm guns), Panzerjäger Abteilung 121 (Russian 76mm guns and German StuGs with 75mm main armament), and Pioneer Battalion 121 (with heavy mortars and combat engineers).

On 14 January, STAVKA began its 1944 winter offensive aimed at the capture of Riga. At the outset, the 1st Shock Army had detected the removal of one regiment of the 121st Infantry Division from its positions south of Leningrad. Thus the first heavy enemy attacks on 16 January broke through this sector. By the 26th, the front of *Armee Gruppe Nord* had been ruptured. The 121st Division, consisting of the 405th and 408th Regiments at the time, retreated along with the remainder of its parent unit, 18th Army. The 121st fell back in disarray to Ljuban, and there managed to hold it long enough for other units to escape. Only rifle Regiments 405 and 408 were still with the division, losses reduced the normal complement of 1400 men to 630 combat effective by 5 February.

Although not destroyed, 18th Army lost tens of thousands of men and the front was shattered. A headlong retreat for the Panther Line positions was on. Hitler agreed to the withdrawal, albeit too late, on 15 February. De-

spite the disaster, most German units managed to find their way to the positions and began occupying the Panther Line in force by March 1st. Despite an advance of some 300 kilometers, the Red Army missed its opportunity to sweep the majority of the German formations into the encirclement planned by STAVKA.

### SPRING BATTLES—

The 121st Infantry moved into 18th Army positions on the right flank, holding a series of heights at the link between Army Groups North and Center. Known as 'the Balcony', a dominating height loomed up some fifteen miles due north-northeast of Ostrov, just south of Lake Peipus. The German positions afforded excellent observation of the adjacent marshy flatlands.

Placed in reserve at first, to recover from the devastation wrought on its organization in the Leningrad battles, 121st Infantry Division soon took over the left sector of the 8th Jaeger Division and the right one of the 212th Infantry so that the entire 2 kilometer Balcony position, including its northern spurs, lay in its sector.

The Germans weren't given much time to organize their defenses along the line. By 4 March the Russians were again on the attack at various points on the Panther Line.

On 9 March the enemy attacked the Balcony along with all sectors south as far as the army boundary with Army Group Center. These were just holding attacks, but they aimed strong tank forces at the Balcony position at Suevo-Ivankovo. On the 10th heavy attacks drove at the north half around Ivankovo-Panevo. 121 had prepared counterattack plans in advance, and had taken plenty of time to devise routes of approach, and to ensure coordination with the artillery and assault guns that would accompany their efforts. Once the Russian attack had lost its steam, these plans were set in motion. In a blistering series of attacks, the 121st went in and successfully restored the line, retaking the Balcony positions.

Throughout the rest of March and April, the Russians achieved several penetrations into the German positions along the Panther Line, but could never achieve a real breakthrough. Key to the German defense was a flexible artillery arrangement, which allowed the German artillery to come down on key Russian movements and attacks. By contrast, the Russian artillery was usually only able to take part before the battle, and thus was absent during key portions of potential breakouts when the German artillery was wreaking havoc.

After these battles, the Germans were allowed three months of quiet to rebuild their broken formations and repair the already-extensive entrenchments. The supply situation was quite good for them, but the Russians took the same time to build a massive force opposite the Panther Line.

By the end of May, Russian preparations for a large attack were obvious. The muddy period of spring, which prevented big maneuvers, was almost over. Reconnaissance was evident and major units could be seen training close behind the line. In spite of their usual excellent camouflage, the Russians

were obviously preparing to attack the joint between Army Groups North and Center. Still, the villages on the Russian side were seemingly empty. No movement whatsoever could be detected. Immediately before the attack, the Russians had more than 20 infantry divisions and large numbers of vehicles drawn up against the Panther Line, but there was no sign of them from the air, and the Germans could only guess at exactly where they were deployed. Tension among the experienced troops on both sides was high. Maslennikov was designated the Commander of the Third Baltic Front, formed of the troops on the left wing of the Leningrad Front for the liberation of Baltic states, which was to become his most successful campaign.

### SUMMER BATTLES—

Finally, the heavy air of expectation was punctured. On 22 June, 300 Soviet guns began a massive bombardment of the 18th Army positions, with a focus on the Balcony. The forward positions of 121 were smothered in heavy artillery fire, designed to fold in their entrenchments and bunkers. The next day, the Russian 2nd Baltic Front launched holding attacks along the whole front of the 18th Army positions north of the Balcony. Penetrations were made at Baevo in the north, and at the southeastern corner of the Balcony at Voshchinino. The 33rd Rifle Division, accompanied by a storm of armor, then exploited the Voshchinino gap and collapsed the entire Balcony position. The Russians were able to push the front as far as the Judino government estate through Gorodets. Only in the center was it possible to recover a little ground through local counterattacks.

The Germans plotted their counter overnight. A company of Tigers from the 502 Heavy Tank Battalion was called up from reserve not far behind the Balcony, and they settled in with the 121st headquarters at Robinyaty to plan their next move.

The two forces collided on the 24th. The German counter was built around the 121st Infantry Division, of course, with support from heavy artillery, assault guns, and Tigers of the 502nd. They won the meeting engagement around the Balcony and pushed forward to recollect most of the old positions, although with serious losses.

Most serious for the Germans were losses in Tigers, which could not be replaced.

Both sides again recovered during the night, and on the 25th the Russians took the initiative, taking back the villages of Voshchinino and Suevo. On the 26th, the 121st attacked again, and again with the aid of the remaining Tigers, were able to restore most of the original defensive line. The 121st pioneers had the most success on the right, taking back the village of Voshchinino in heavy fighting.

With the attack obviously fixated on the Balcony, the 18th Army HQ had the 30th Infantry Division take over some of the 121st left flank. But 27 June saw the Russians attacking again in the southeast corner of the Balcony, while a small counterattack by the 121st to take back the Baevo-Ivankovo section of the position was crushed. The Russians were able to then penetrate as far as Utkino-Gorodets. While a dangerous bulge in

the line, it won no truly valuable advantage and the Germans were just able to contain the penetration.

On the 28th, the enemy called a halt to their assaults in the area. This second defensive engagement for the Balcony concluded the defensive battles for Ostrov and Pskov. There were no further Russian attacks in this sector, and the Russian 1st Shock Army was to take no further part in the fighting until the fall.

Initially, the Russians were able to utterly crush the forces along the Balcony with strong tank forces, which overran the German positions almost unimpeded. But anti-tank guns, assault guns and infantry were always able to slow the assault, then launch a successful counter-attack and restore the position. Small-caliber anti-aircraft guns and a small number of 88mm anti-tank guns at the crucial points were key in the defense. Tigers and close infantry cooperation was a linchpin on the attack. Thus after 18 days, the attacks against the Panther Line were abandoned, despite having been launched with some surprise and with strong local superiority. A more flexible attack, having gotten the Germans to commit their reserves, would have been launched in another zone, but the Russians failed to do this. With the help of the Tigers of 502, the 121st was able to hold the hills.

## EPILOGUE

However, this was the last major action for the Panther Line, and all in vain, for just to the south, the Russians were making a supreme effort. Operation Bagration was the operation the Germans thought the Russians were incapable of: well-planned, fast-moving, and directed towards Germany. The attack utterly crushed Army Group Center in a matter of weeks. By mid-July it was all over, and the Russians were on their way to Poland. On July 11, Army Group North abandoned the Panther Line. But it was too late. The Russians had already steamed past 18th Army on the south edge. They soon drove north to Riga, and pocketed the entire army group that had held so strongly to the Panther Line.

Maslennikov's 3rd Baltic Front troops broke through the Panther-Line in July 1944, and based on that success, he was awarded the rank of Army General. The 3rd Baltic Front maintained heavy pressure on the Germans until the front was disbanded on the 16th of October in order to consolidate the organizations for the final drive into Germany.

**1.2 Land Forms**—The Panther Line mapsheet depicts a natural terrain feature, a dominating hill mass, chosen by the Germans to hinge their local defense line upon.

**1.3 Terrain Forms**—Much of the game map consists of Open Ground (e.g., hex H12). The rest is dominated by a series of Hills, soaring to Level +50 heights. Example: Hex KK24 is at Level -10; MM12 is Level +10; LL12 is Level +20; KK12 is Level +30; II9 is Level +40; and II10 is Level +50. There are a handful of large and small fields of Crops (e.g., hex Q27). Orchards (e.g., hex L24) are found here and there, mostly near the villages of Ivankovo and Voschinino. Hillocks (e.g., hexside PP18/PP17) are found on all of the hills. Brush (e.g., hex HH17) is also present, as is Woods (e.g., hex EE20). Some Cliffs (e.g., hexsides HH12/

II13 and R9/R10) are found on the large hill. Ravines (e.g., hex HH15) are carved into the landscape. Players should note these move up and down with the rolling land, and MP costs are paid according to movement UP and DOWN levels. Example: A unit in hex HH18 enters the Ravine in II18 without moving UP a level as the bottom of the Ravine is also at the level of the terrain it is leaving, i.e., Level -10. Signs of Soviet shelling and bombardments dot the map in the form of numerous Shellholes (e.g., hex RR16). Some building hexes have already been converted into Rubble (e.g., hex DD10), and some on-map Wire hexes have been eliminated, replaced by Shellholes (e.g., hex EE5).

A few Precipitous Terrain hexes exist (e.g., hex HH12 entered from HH13), where a +20 change in levels is created when moving from one hex to another.

Rock-Strewn terrain is found on the large hill (e.g., hex JJ12). a three-hex wide Pond (e.g., hex F2) is located near the village of Ivankovo, as is some Swamp (e.g., hex E5) terrain.

**1.3.1 Buildings**—There are four small villages on the map, all apparently farming villages based on the nearby fields of crops and orchards. Ivankovo is located in the northeast corner of the map. Voschinino is located in the southeast corner and Gorodets is located dead-center along the west edge. The tiny, partially bombed-out hamlet of Suevo (Sewejo in German) is located on top of the dominating hill mass, centered around hex EE11.

Note that most of the buildings on the map are Wooden buildings (e.g., hex G6), and consist of Ground level locations ONLY (and they are Level +10 LOS Obstacles). Masonry buildings include X26/Y27 (with a Level 0 and Level +10 'second story') and OO4 and FF11 (both with Ground level locations only). The buildings in hexes DD10 and EE12 are already treated as Rubbled Masonry buildings.

**1.3.11 Workers Settlements**—The small collection of structures found in some hexes (e.g., hex D6) are treated as single hex 'house' style Wooden buildings normally with the following exception.

**1.3.111 Blind Hexes**—Reduce by ONE any Blind Hexes created by a Workers settlement hex.

**1.3.2 Other Man Made Terrain**—A few Wall (e.g., hexside FF11/GG11) hexsides are on the map, as are numerous Hedges (e.g., hexside NN2/NN3). Un-paved roads (e.g., hex E6) connect the various villages.

**1.4 Terrain Rules**—The following rules are provided in addition to the terrain rules presented in the main rulebook and apply ONLY to the PANTHER LINE mapsheet.

**1.4.1 Dirt and Paved Road**—All roads depict Dirt roads (brown; e.g., X18).

**1.4.2 Pond Terrain**—No unit may enter Pond hexes. Note: The terrain in the 'hollow' near the Ivankovo pond is Level -10 (e.g., hex G2), and the terrain art along the F2/G2 hexside shows the terrain sloping up to a 'bank' at Level 0, from G2, and then down in to the Pond at Level -10 in F2. This should not have any impact on play and is simply noted for the sake of detail.

**1.4.3 On Map Hedgehogs**—The 'trench' art-

work found in hexes like U9 represents Hedgehog emplacements. They are treated normally as Hedgehogs except where noted below.

**1.4.31 FC Markers**—Any unit in an on-map Hedgehog (e.g., hex F21) hex is considered to be ON TOP of a Hedgehog emplacement counter. Any unit that would otherwise be considered UNDER a Hedgehog counter is marked with an 'FC' marker (or players may alternately place Hedgehog counters ON TOP OF such unit to signify their status in FULL cover).

**1.4.32 Adjacent Hedgehogs**—Unlike Hedgehog COUNTERS, which are ALL considered to 'connect' when adjacent, on map Hedgehogs ONLY connect across hexsides crossed by the 'trenchline' artwork. Thus, a unit may ONLY remain in FULL cover when moving from one adjacent Hedgehog to another if moving across 'connected' Hedgehog hexsides. Example: The Hedgehog in hex CC11 connects to the one in CC12; it does not connect to BB11.

**1.4.4 On Map Wire**—The Wire printed on map is treated normally in all respects except where noted below.

**14.41 Removal**—On map Wire is NOT removed by C6+ results. Minefield Lane marker are still placed by Tracked vehicles normally.

**1.5. LOS and Movement Examples**—The following examples clarify Lines-of-Sight on the PANTHER LINE mapsheet.

a) A squad in hex P9 can see one in E5 since the Workers Settlement in G6 reduces the normal Blind Hexes created from 2 to 1 hex.

b) A squad in hex G6, firing at one in D4, applies a 2L shift for Improved building cover and a 1L column shift on the Casualty Table due to the +5 Obscuring Swamp terrain in hex E5 for a total of THREE left shifts.

c) A squad in FULL cover in the Hedgehog in hex F19 can move to F20, remaining in Full cover. It could NOT move from F19 to G20 without first moving ON TOP of the Hedgehog in F19.

d) A unit in hex D16 can see one in C6, and ignores the Crops and Hedges along the LOS since D16 is +10 levels high.

e) A squad on a Level +10 marker in the building hex X26 can fire at one in X23 with no shifts on the Casualty Table due to the ability to see over the Crops in hexes X24 and X25.

f) A unit in hex T21 can fire at one in U23 with NO EFFECT on its LOS from the Woods in hex T22 since the LOS along the U22/T22 hexside does not touch any of the Woods artwork in hex T22.

g) A Gun in hex T4, firing at an AFV in Y2, applies a +4 HPN DRM due to the Brush in hexes U4-V3-W3-X2.

h) A unit down in the Ravine in hex MM24 cannot see to MM26 since an LOS 'thread' drawn from the center dot in MM24 leaves the Ravine artwork in MM24 before continuing to MM25-MM26.

## PANTHER LINE CREDITS:

DESIGNER: MARK PORTERFIELD

DEVELOPER: BOB DAVIS

HISTORICAL SUMMARY: KURT MARTIN