ON THE BLACK RIVER

By HARO TRÜSTEDT

To communicate the experience of war to someone who has not been through it himself is as difficult as trying to talk of colors to a blind man. Hence, for all the vast numbers of front-line reports, there are only a few which actually give the reader at home a feeling of what the front is like. Among these is the following description of the fighting on the Black River on the northern sector of the German-Soviet front. The front line in various parts of the northern sector has changed little or not at all, while the central and southern sectors of the front have been in constant movement since the spring of 1942.—K.M.

THOSE who lived through the battles on the Black River, who saw the scented forests rent asunder, the ancient moors rooted up, and many a comrade falling there and bleeding to death, may well have been brought to despair by the feverish onslaught of all those agonizing questions as to the meaning of this suffering, indeed, of life itself, into which man is born so blindly. But none of that. The infantryman, whose last year's dugout has long been destroyed, who lives in the ooze of water-logged shell and bomb holes, who has no other possession than his piece of canvas to cover himself with during his short hours of light sleep and his weapons to defend his own life and the life of the entire northern front, that of his country and his people—this infantryman has turned into a pure element of nature, like the stars he sees rising and setting according to the eternal law in which he recognizes himself.

At first the magnificent forests were still a true realm of innocent, cruel, beautiful nature, which passes through the constant change in sublime, immutable serenity and fills it with divine meaning.

And here, amongst comrades from almost all parts of Germany, a Rhenish-Westphalian grenadier regiment had established itself on the dominating road which follows the edge of the forest, leading along a treacherous bog covered with sparse bush. These western Germans, mostly from Düsseldorf, had built dugouts neatly lined with birch bark. In memory of their beautiful home town they had named the old forest road "Königsallee"; and their outpost far out in the bog they called the "Deutsche Eck."

Facing them across the Black River, in a front line running almost straight from north to south, lay the Soviets, invisible and menacing. But when we turned our eyes to the left, we could see a blue lake shimmering far across the bottomless bog and a narrow strip of forest along its banks. It often shone so brilliantly that we had to blink; so brilliantly, indeed, that the refracted light of its waves was thrown up onto the clouds in the blue sky and we were amazed and stirred to see the delightful interplay of light and motion on the wide lake repeated in the endless spaces above.

But soon the lake froze over, and the days saw hardly any light at all. Winter came with an unimaginable harshness. Motors stood still, bread and butter, sausage and honey came only in a frozen state, soup and coffee in pieces, and the hungry horses ate twigs from fir trees, birch bark, and each other's tails. The sentries shivered and exerted their utmost will to keep the spark of life going in themselves; yet many were found standing as if alive, human columns of ice, when they were to be relieved; now they lie safely in the darkness of the earth.

After the anxieties of winter, spring awoke and intoxicated blood and sap alike, so that the tender shoots of the birch trees blushed and shone and made all eyes sparkle with joy. The water came alive, it rained down from the gray sky and gushed forth from the bogs, which could no longer be distinguished from the lake. It was no longer any use bailing out the dugouts, the water was stronger—the men had to climb out onto the roofs. Butterflies fluttered over the first green; ferns unrolled from the receding floods; when tapped, the birches gushed forth so much of their precious sap that, in trying to catch it, we could wash ourselves in it. The crows disappeared into the forest. The magpies, lapwings, snipes, and all the countless singing birds were busy with themselves and shrilled and jubilated in heavenly delight. The geese returned, screaming with joy, and among the dark firs the mountain cock gobbled, blind in his frenzy of love.

Then there was no more night. The forest round about was turned into one vast nursery. In the bog, which was dusted with cotton-grass blossoms as with snow, ducks and whistling swans were hatching, nightingales warbled, the time came and went when we could make eggnogs from lapwing eggs, young hedgehogs appeared and were trained, snakes moved through the wilderness, mice, mosquitoes . . . and mosquitoes, mosquitoes, till we went almost crazy. But then, when we caught a glimpse of the horned king of the northern forests, a mighty elk, his beauty silenced our curses at the diabolical bog, and we sensed the eternal power of creation.

Along the "Königsallee" and far into the wild underbrush, one position after another was built, field railways, barrier positions, and dugouts, dugouts that were made comfortable behind shiny white birchwood fences.

And finally cobwebs floated gently across the country, the forest smelled more strongly of old resin, and the birches turned golden.

Titmice played around in the autumn twigs, squirrels danced up and down the pine trunks like red flames. But the Soviets on the other side of the Black River were removing mines in no-man's-land. Dispatch bearers were gliding through the undergrowth, which was not able entirely to swallow up the sound of motors. Radio messages were intercepted: there could be no doubt, the Bolshevists were going to attack.

At five o'clock on the morning of August 27, while a light mist still covered the ground, the business really started. Out of the solemn quiet of the jungle a storm of shells of all calibers, accompanied by the howling of bombs, suddenly broke over our positions. It lasted for hours.

Then a single shout of relief came from hundreds of throats: "They're coming . . . !" The bombardment had ended. They came and attacked—but with tanks, countless tanks and battle planes which fired at any movement they saw. The Russian command intended to force a break-through and sent tens of thousands of men in a wide front against our few positions in the marshy forest. The Black River, which separated us from the enemy, turned red beside the terribly thinned-out forest. Eight times the Bolsheviks attacked on this first day—and did not advance a single step.

But during the night, during all the following nights, figures seeped further south through the high reeds, through the almost impenetrable, splashing thicket, slowly and softly, sinister brown figures, at first a few, soon a few hundred, and then thousands, more and more, like demons, which sank away, reappeared, slipped away, disappeared. And suddenly they stood in the rear of the Germans on the road, cutting off the regiment from its headquarters, located a few kilometers back near a small "24 ton" bridge. In the north, toward the lake, the Soviets were not able to overrun the position in the flat bog, the "Deutsche Eck." In spite of all their artillery and tanks, they were unable to annihilate this single, isolated German company.

But to creep past the position through the murderous bog, they knew how to do that—and now the regiment was encircled. Soviet tanks barred the road between regimental headquarters and the front-line positions.

The regimental commander immediately collected all dispatch bearers, regimental clerks, radio operators, and baggage men, and left them as a last protection at the "24 ton" bridge, while he himself with his most trusted men broke through the surprised Bolsheviks, past all the Soviet tanks, to his trapped men. The almost impossible deed succeeded, and his grenadiers cheered their "little king" in their midst. For seven days he and his men, surrounded in a tiny area and supplied only from the air, not only held the position in spite of uninterrupted fire from all sides but even restored connections with the "24 ton" bridge, so that the regiment, facing east and south, where the enemy was still pushing more and more forces into the deep forest, formed the hinge of the entire northern front.

Seven days later they were freed by German Alpine infantry. Simultaneous with the attack from here, another was started from the hinge on the other side, south of the Bolshevist break-through. Both attacks advanced, and finally the hosts of men in the forest were, in turn, encircled and completely annihilated. Thousands of Soviets were swallowed up by the bog.

Colonel Wengler, the commander of the Rhenish-Westphalian regiment which had broken all the waves of the Soviet attack and thus made the German victory possible, was decorated with the Knight's Cross; and from that day on the little area along the Black River which had proved such a stubborn rock was known as the "Wengler Head."

*

Once again the men from the Rhine celebrated Christmas here. Past experience had shown that timely work at fortifying the positions saves loss in lives later on. So the countryside was entirely transformed according to the tactical ideas of the tireless commander. This made it possible for the men to enjoy Christmas in complete confidence that there would be no surprises from the Bolsheviks. To this was added the pleasure over the warm new winter uniforms. Potatoes and turnips had been stored safely. The new year started with frost and snow, clean and white. On the twelfth day of the new year, however, the snow suddenly turned black with torn-up earth and red with blood: with an artillery barrage of undreamed-of force the new attack of the Soviets had begun. This time they concentrated their entire firing power, from the east, the north, the northwest, and from above with bombs and airplane cannons, on the "Wengler Head," in order to gain the road, above all the road. The bog, even the lake was frozen, and there was no reason why they should not advance across them with their tanks. But of what use would the oozing bog be to them in summer? They had to have the road at any price.

Day and night, without interruption, they drummed away. Raving madness should have seized those who were not yet mangled. At the "Wengler Head" there were soon no telephone lines, no dispatch bearers, no trenches, no dugouts, no antitank guns, indeed, no heavy weapons of any kind, no mine fields and no reserves of ammunition—nothing. All around there was not even any forest left standing—nothing.

But when the Bolsheviks came storming with a loud "urrrah," men rose from the torn-up earth, poor, lost, but living men, and flung back the amazed hordes with their last hand grenades, jumped onto the tanks and blasted them, mercilessly struck down enemy after enemy in hand-to-hand fighting, and held the position.

Meanwhile, the enemy tanks had rolled on across the frozen bog and suddenly stood on the road again at the "24-ton" bridge, where the dugout containing regimental headquarters had received a direct hit. The colonel, himself wounded in the

head, was placidly tapping out messages in the midst of all the shambles. When his regiment inquired: "What is meaning of infantry fire from the west?" he replied: "Regimental headquarters passing additional tests for acquiring medal for hand-to-hand fighting." Now everyone knew what was going on: as in the autumn, when it had faced east and south, the regiment had once again to be the hinge of this entire sector of the front. But this time the Soviets had broken through north of the regiment and were by now preparing to encircle it. Once again the commander suddenly appeared at the most threatened point, took up quarters in the small dugout from which he had directed the autumn battle, and made it possible through his determined holding on for the High Command to build up the new northern front along the "Königsallee" and the bogs that had been lost to the enemy.

This new northern front has held, although the Soviets attacked for weeks, day after day, with artillery, battle planes, tanks, and thousands upon thousands of infantrymen, and are still attacking. But they did not get the road.

In February the regiment, which twice held the entire northern front, was finally relieved. A regiment of North German grenadiers has taken its place. What was once a well-constructed position is now a torn-up field of craters. After countless Soviet attacks and German counterattacks, the actual front line gradually moved from crater to crater, so that finally all that remained was a "Wengler Nose" covering the actual hinge of the front on the "Königsallee" and jutting out into the bog. Along the base of this "nose," new positions were built at a higher elevation, so that recently—a small but typical example of the general, well-prepared withdrawal of the front—the main front line could be transferred to these dominating heights without interference on the part of the enemy.

Do you comprehend now that those who have gone through experiences of this kind with such inborn superiority are proof against all idle talk; that they are like nature herself who serenely faces eternal change, like the stars which fulfill their destiny according to the Law? It is true that, as far as the eye can see, there is no more forest, no squirrels dance merrily, no birds sing their songs. And many comrades can listen only to the secret whisperings of the great mother who has folded her hands over them. They rest in peace. Just as under the rays of the life-giving sun the glistening play of the waves is reflected again in the sky, the deeds of the dead and the living appear more sublime in the eternal soul of their nation and invigorate it on and on to immortality.

Combatant Pigeons

Centuries before Christ, the Greeks used pigeons to send the names of the winners in the Olympic Games to their home towns, the message being attached to the pigeon's leg. Seventy years ago, during the siege of Paris, the French sent messages by pigeon post out of the besieged city, and the Germans tried using trained hawks to kill the French pigeons. In the last war, homing pigeons were used to send back messages from the trenches when telephones had been destroyed.

In this war, pigeons are being used by the air forces. If a plane is in difficulty or is shot down over the sea, the airmen send off a pigeon with a message, giving their position tied to its leg, and the pigeon flies back to its loft. When it arrives, the bird, by alighting on its perch, automatically rings an electric bell and so no time is lost. Use is now also being made of pigeons to give the position of ships when wireless would betray them to the enemy.