

TURN OF THE TIDE - STALINGRAD

TWO names, Stalingrad and El Alamein, will forever be associated in histories of the World War. At each of these places, one a proud city, the other a barren desert waste, the seemingly invincible German armies suffered their first crushing defeats. The turn of the tide had arrived at last, and the Allies swung over to the offensive after nearly three years of bitter defensive fighting.

Stalingrad before the war was a city of 149,000 inhabitants, situated on the West bank of the Volga, approximately 200 miles north-west of the Caspian Sea. The city's importance rested upon its vital communication centre and heavy industries. Along the Volga passed the oil from the rich Caucasian oilfields on its way to Moscow and Northern Russia. Factories that formerly produced much of the farming machinery for the rich Donets Basin were now turning out endless streams of tanks and other weapons. The loss of this vital centre would mean the capture of the last direct line of communication between north and south Russia.

In October, 1942 the German armies were nearing Astrakhan at the Volga delta and their right wing was practically at the Grozny oilfields in the Caucasus. Towards the end of October the battle for Stalingrad commenced. The strength of the Russian defenders is not known, but behind them lay the steep banks of the river - there was to be no retreat.

The Sixth German Army, comprising at least 22 divisions under Field-Marshal Von Paulus and the armoured division expert, Field-Marshal Von Manstein, invested the city from the three sides. Under cover of terrific artillery barrages and devastating air raids, the Germans forced the outer suburbs of the city. The Russians fought fiercely for every street, every building, but were forced slowly back by the terrific weight of armour and men opposed to them.

A deadlock was eventually reached when, on a narrower front, the Russians managed to stem the enemy onslaught. The Germans, with air superiority, then began systematically to wipe out the city, block by block, by heavy air bombardments. Still the Russians fought on.

During those thirty terrible days the Russians repulsed 117 tank and infantry attacks, were shelled for eight hours by massed artillery, and perhaps worst of all, for 320 hours the Luftwaffe, unopposed at times devastated the heroic city.

The Russians, under Generals Popov, Vatutin and Rokossovsky repelled all attacks and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy.

Then, about the middle of November, the Russian relief armies which had been massing behind the Volga struck. Under the supreme command of Rokossovsky they forced crossings of the Volga north and south of the city. After terrific battles in which Von Manstein's armoured divisions were badly mauled, the Russian pincers closed behind the German Sixth Army and all escape was cut off. Meanwhile, a general Russian offensive had opened all along the southern line. Von Manstein refused to surrender to avoid further bloodshed, so Rokossovsky's forces steadily closed in, and early in January 1943 the remnants of the German Sixth Army were mopped up. Close on 200,000 Germans had been eliminated and enormous quantities of war materials captured. Stalingrad was free, but little was left of this once proud city.

The courage of her defenders will forever be remembered and enshrined in the new city already arising from the smoking ruins.

Gallant Stalingrad, recipient of the Sword of Honour, we of El Alamein salute thee!

A.N.

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