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FOREIGN MILITARY STUDIES

VOLUME I

N-17500.5-B

NUMBER 13

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SMALL UNIT TACTICS

UNUSUAL SITUATIONS

Part II

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Small Unit Tactics, Part II: Unusual Situations.
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Four examples of Russian tactical expedients taken from the defensive operations of the German XI Corps along the upper Donets River front in August 1943. The development of the Corps' situation as background; and German defensive tactics to prevent Russians crossing the river. Description of the Russian "swamp battalion" which gained a foothold on the western bank by remaining all day in a swamp submerged to their chests; rifles were hung in tree branches and floated on boards. During the heavy fighting, a unit appeared in the German positions wearing German uniforms, carrying German equipment, and speaking German; they opened fire on the Germans at close range, thus revealing themselves. The Russians succeeded in crossing the river with tanks and without a bridge, much to the surprise of the Germans; a counterattack revealed an underwater bridge which had been made by pushing tanks into the river and tying planks to their tops. Also an unusual tactical measure of creating a "defensive bridgehead" within an "offensive bridgehead" which saved the Russians a foothold on the western bank when a German counterattack almost succeeded in eliminating the salient.

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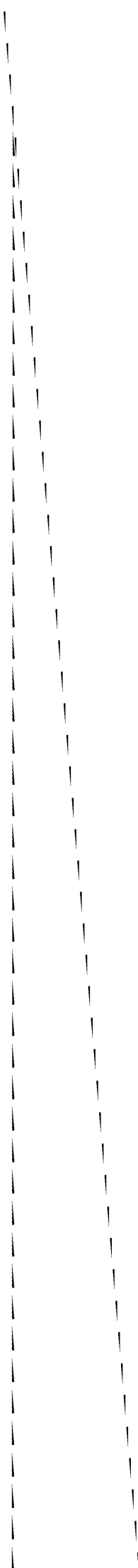
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SMALL UNIT TACTICS

Part II: Unusual Situations

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FOREIGN MILITARY STUDIES

Historical Division
Headquarters European Command

VOLUME I

May 1952

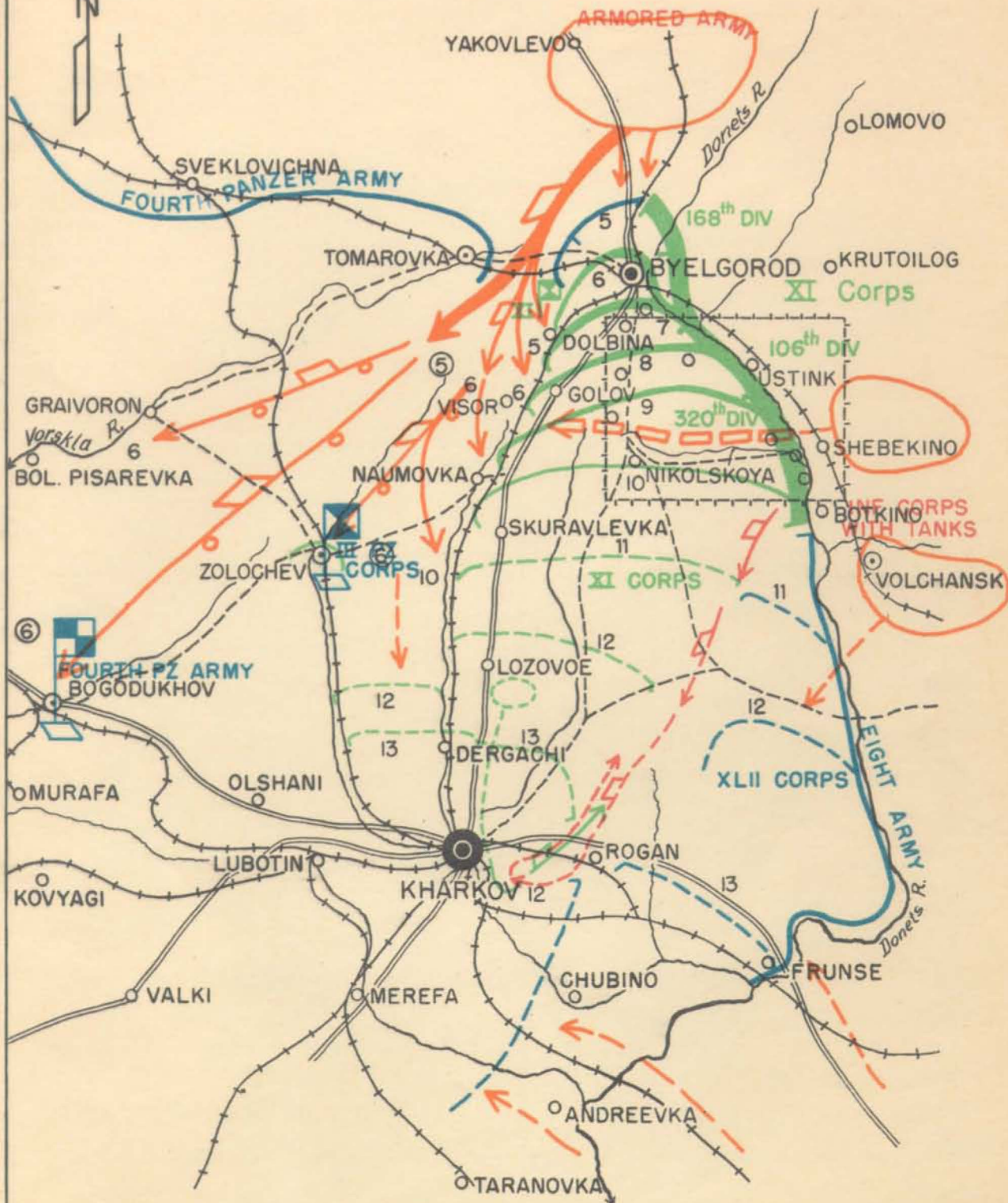
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DEFENSIVE WITHDRAWAL OF THE XI CORPS SOUTH OF BYELGOROD IN AUGUST 1943



Introduction

The following examples were taken from a difficult situation facing the XI Corps (Hanover) during the defensive operations along the upper Donets River in the early days of August 1943. In this situation not only the commanders of large units, but also those of small and very small units were confronted with unusual problems which had to be solved independently. In order that the purpose and the results of the measures taken by both sides may be understood and appraised correctly as part of the overall operations, the development of the situation of the corps will first be briefly described.

After the large-scale German pincer attack against Kursk (code name ZITADELLE), started on 5 July 1943, had failed, the positions of all units participating in the attack were again withdrawn to the line of departure, or at least close to it. In this process, the four infantry divisions comprising the XI Corps, which in the attack had been committed at the southern flank, were returned to their old, well-fortified positions located along the upper Donets River in the area on both sides of Belgorod. In the preceding heavy battles, which had continued for a whole month, the divisions had suffered severe losses. They could not expect to receive any replacements for a long time to come. Their combat strengths were down to forty to fifty percent of those prescribed in their tables of organization, and in the case of some regiments they were even lower.

The disengagement from the enemy proceeded smoothly. Even the bridgehead at Belgorod, which had been held by the XI Corps, the last unit to fight east of the Donets River, was evacuated with ease. The enemy divisions, which had been beaten shortly before, advanced toward the river again very cautiously. They probably did not understand why the Germans were withdrawing voluntarily and, therefore, were suspicious. Their suspicions were not unjustified, since many a German retirement had been followed by a surprise attack, which had wrought havoc on the enemy's forces. This time, however, the withdrawal was genuine, with no trickery intended. It was solely dictated by the desire to intercept on a shorter fortified line, the expected counter-attack of the enemy's strategic reserves, which were still intact.

On 5 August 1943, after the enemy artillery had fired heavily for one hour, the enemy offensive began along the Belgorod-Kursk

