

In 1941-42 the British Empire endures such crushing setbacks that Winston Churchill is driven to seek divine guidance. Prompted to increase his Pacific commitment following the Battle of Midway; giving rise to some unusual and unexpected outcomes.

CHURCHILL'S REVELATION

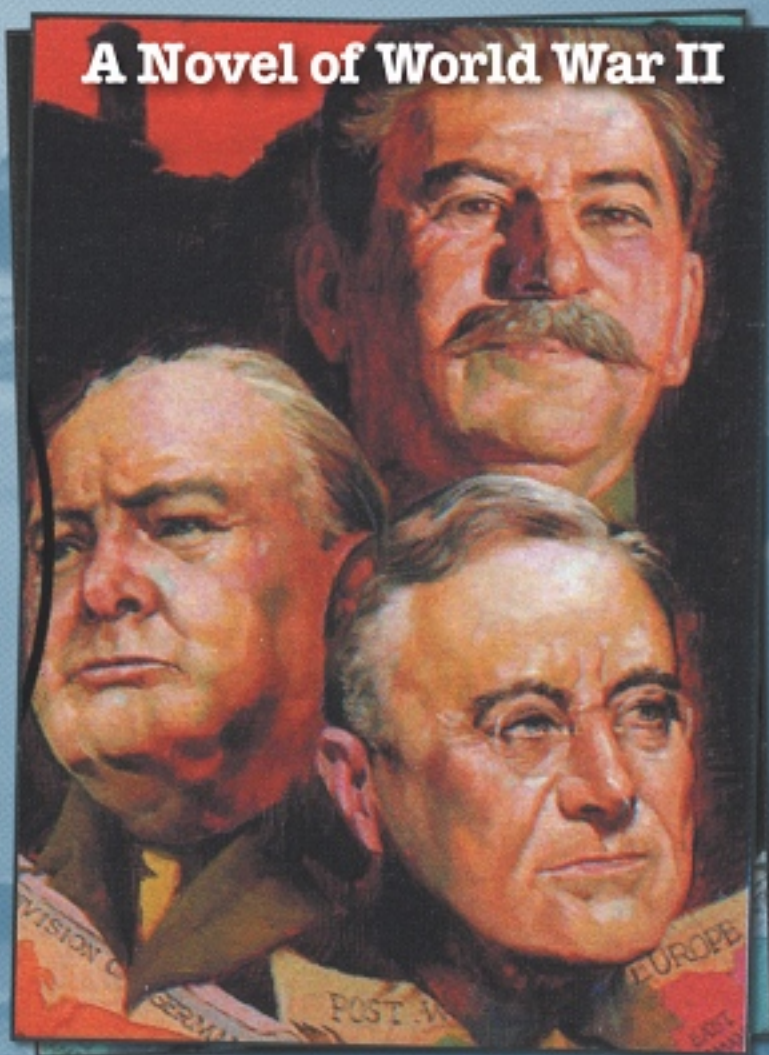
By Merrill Hardy

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Merrill Hardy

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CHAPTER 1

Wilhelm Bach (1) and Heinz Guderian

Early March, 1942 – North African Desert

The world was at war, and fighting in the Mediterranean had been ongoing for more than two years. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill demanded action from his Middle East commanding general, General Auchinleck. As dawn broke in the North African desert, a somewhat reluctant General Auchinleck gave the order, and a barrage from more than 400 artillery pieces blindly fired on suspected enemy positions. Morning quiet was shattered, and in many places, the sun was obscured by rising clouds of desert dust atomized by hundreds of exploding shells.

Italian and German soldiers alike pushed as far down in their foxholes as they could or huddled in bunker corners, hardly able to breathe, and covered from head to foot as the fine, reddish-tinged desert dust threatened to bury them alive. Cordite fumes wafted to even the deepest dugouts and left a metallic taste in the mouths of soldiers. Nerves were on end in those foxholes as the men prayed:

“Holy Father, please let me survive to see my home and family one more time.”

Axis field artillery, per Field Marshal (2) Heinz Guderian’s orders, did not respond in kind to this barrage. Nevertheless, the locations of these offending guns were plotted for future reference.

Following on the heels of this barrage, inexperienced *First Armored Division* (3) troops, supported by armored cars and an Infantry Division, charged ahead, confident of crushing the Axis spirit in a powerful raid. Their primary mission was distraction, to support Churchill’s critical Malta relief convoy, but they desired to cause as much destruction as possible in the process.

Colonel Wilhelm Bach’s mobile defense offered only a token resistance and drew these English troops deeper into the southern desert until *First Armored* tanks outpaced most of their artillery support. Then Axis troops opened a withering artillery fire, which included Italian

guns, many mounted on trucks and armored cars. For under tutelage, many different weapons had been mounted on captured British and American vehicles.

Wilhelm turned to Heinz:

"Just as we planned Herr Field Marshall, few will escape your trap."

Wilhelm was a former Lutheran pastor, handpicked by Heinz to improve force defensive and offensive capabilities in North Africa.

Working together, they fought political battles with Hitler and his bureaucratic minions over sharing almost nonexistent war material while competing with the priorities of ongoing fighting in Russia and a planned invasion of Malta. Of course, they also contended with the *British Navy* and *Royal Air Force (RAF)* who sat astride their supply lines. Between them, however, they solved or muddled through every issue in preparation for Churchill's assault.

"Then let us make it so, have 15th Panzer Division close the back door," replied Heinz.

#####

First Armored was next attacked by Axis fighters and fighter-bombers. Eventually, the back door was slammed shut, and *First Armored* was trapped. German and Italian tanks backed up by artillery and anti-tank guns closed their escape route back to the British lines. It began almost as quickly as it started. In less than two days, the *First Armored Division* was methodically wiped out. Their supporting Infantry Divisions also suffered heavily as they tried to hold open an escape route.

More than 150 British tanks, together with as many armored cars and other vehicles, were destroyed or captured. Over 9,000 Commonwealth soldiers were captured, wounded, or killed.

Worse, the Axis aircraft were not distracted for long by *First Armored's* incursion and soon refocused their attention on Churchill's relief convoy. Once again, British leadership found themselves on the wrong side of the intelligence exchange in the desert. Heinz had been forewarned of *First Armored's* raid. His intelligence source also revealed that this raid was really a distraction to cover a desperately needed Malta supply convoy. They reacted accordingly.

Even for Churchill, the loss of a whole Armored Division was a difficult pill to swallow, on top of other recent failures. Once again, they were subjected to a humiliating Italian prisoner exchange. Obviously,

even reduced Axis desert forces were still capable of stopping an attack of this size. Churchill chided Auchinleck severely for this failure. He did this despite the fact that Auchinleck expressed reservations beforehand about the raid's chance of success.

However, both Churchill and Auchinleck breathed a small sigh of relief when less than a fortnight later they learned that Heinz Guderian was ill and was flown out of Africa. Heinz was so distraught that he was stricken at this critical time that he asked Wilhelm:

"Please pray for my speedy recovery, this could not come at a worse time."

"I will pray every day for such to happen, Herr Field Marshall, all our prayers are with you," as Wilhelm released Heinz's hand and watched as he was carried on a stretcher to a waiting aircraft.

#####

Churchill had assigned a commando team to kill Heinz, just as he had attempted late last year with his predecessor, Erwin Rommel. However, Churchill stipulated that Heinz's assassination was to be executed, if possible, so that it could not be traced back to Great Britain. Churchill was disappointed that Heinz had not died but was nonetheless glad his illness had not yet been connected to an attempt to kill him.

Heinz's medical diagnosis of desert colic sent experts scurrying to identify potential recovery times. However, no physicians in England could be found who were familiar with this disease. Churchill's chief of staff was not aware of the sanctioned assassination attempt. When he informed Churchill of Heinz's recent collapse, the reaction was terse.

"Good news. Whatever disease he contracted, let us hope it is severe enough to kill him. That cold-blooded Prussian made me wish we were back dealing with Rommel. At the very least he had all my generals second guessing themselves."

Now more than ever, with Stalin and Roosevelt looking over his shoulder, Churchill was desperate to knock Italy out of the war. So far no one but Stalin had offered anything approaching a significant victory against the Axis. He had held his breath when Leningrad and Moscow had been spared, now he was holding his breath watching progress at Sevastopol.

#####

Wilhelm was also gravely concerned when Heinz was suddenly taken ill. Before it happened, Wilhelm expressed his concern about the strain that Heinz was under:

“Not only do you have to endure the rigors of command and all the problems that the Africa Theater presents, but we must fight over equipment and troop movements with the Italians. Moreover, General Halder (Army Chief of Staff) seems to hate you almost as much as he hated Rommel, but maybe that is more stressful for him? Also you know that our desert climate, combined with combat stress, can contribute to strange and unusual health problems.”

Apparently, even Field Marshals were not exempt. Oddly enough, only one other individual, one of Heinz's personal guards, was stricken with this same illness.

Command of the desert forces fell to General Ludwig Cruwell, who actually was supposed to report to an Italian Field Marshall but really reported directly to Field Marshall Kesselring, German Theater Commander. However, Kesselring was focused on plans to capture Malta, so Cruwell was more or less on his own. Consequently Wilhelm was also given a free hand.

Everyone knew that Wilhelm was Heinz's point man in Africa. Really, he was Chief of Staff in everything but name only. Conformance to his requests was not an issue in Heinz's absence. Heinz was after all sick, not dead. Dare anyone try and cross him?

In deference to his reputation, all programs that he started were continued. No one felt inclined to slack off. Everyone pretty much knew that if they achieved victory, the margin would be ever-so-thin, leaving no room for slip-ups.

Moreover, fundamental transformations that Heinz and Wilhelm tried to implement were too many and too great. All the different types of tanks and guns created real headaches, as even many captured weapons were slated for modification.

Both were also actively involved in promoting promising young Italian officers and enlisted men into positions of greater responsibility, helping to transform Italian units into models of efficiency. Heinz succeeded in reorganizing his forces remaining in Africa into two Corps, one Italian and one German. Although they were presently in a defensive posture; thanks to repeated efforts both German and Italian Corps were now fully motorized.

End Notes

- (1) Wilhelm Bach (Wilhelm) – Dubbed the Pastor of Hellfire Pass, he was a brilliant line officer and Lutheran pastor whose position and troops were abandoned by Rommel following the Crusader battle. Together with his men, he surrendered on 17 January 1942.
- (2) Equivalent to Five Star General.
- (3) Allied unit designations are in italics.

CHAPTER 2

von Manstein, von Ravenstein, and Conspiracy Crimea Peninsula, Russia

General Hans von Ravenstein (4) knew he had secured General Erich von Manstein's confidence. Together, these two used skillful maneuvers to frustrate Stalin's efforts to destroy von Manstein's Eleventh Army and drive it from the Crimea. Nevertheless, Stalin's feverish attempts continued uninterrupted to do just that from the end of 1941 into early 1942.

Heinz agreed to move critically needed equipment and troops, including Hans himself, to the Crimea. Both generals acknowledged that this contributed to their survival against Stalin's counterattacks. But now Heinz was ill, and von Manstein wondered if any more aid was forthcoming from Africa.

Hans prayed that Heinz recovered quickly and that God would somehow lead all of them out of this awful mess. Hans also discerned that one positive outcome of the Russian winter failures was a resurgence of anti-Hitler sentiment, especially among the officer corps. To top it off, resentment was growing over Hitler's dismissal of several respected and notable generals at the end of 1941. Coupled with Hitler's poor handling of the attack on Moscow, which many felt should never have occurred; their dissonant ranks were clearly growing.

Hans himself recently caught the attention of these dissonant officers due to his involvement in an incident during fighting around Kerch, the easternmost Crimean port city. This incident, coupled with his military connections to both von Manstein and Heinz made him a desirable asset.

Unfortunately, these same dissonant officers were aware of Hans' early anti-Nazi stance, which meant his communications might be more closely followed. Indeed, they were playing a dangerous cat and mouse game. They had no room for mistakes that could lead to a possible premature exposure of their plots against Hitler's Reich.

Hans publicly exposed this 'Kerch anti-tank ditch incident'. He claimed filling this wide ditch for almost two miles with the bodies of

Jewish men, women, and children had compromised his division's defensive scheme. Consequently, when XLII Corps was forced to retreat west, a very public spotlight was on the practical consequences of Nazi mass murders for all Eleventh Army soldiers to ponder. Indeed, no one who witnessed this scene ever forgot the sight of this frozen mass of humanity.

Several dissonant officers had noted with approval Hans' veiled, yet public, exposure of these heinous murders by Himmler's thugs. As far as the dissonant officers were concerned, even more significant was von Manstein's support of Hans' actions.

They knew von Manstein was a classic Prussian enigma. Expressing adherence to Prussian officer moral values, he also followed a strict code of absolute loyalty to the head of state. Given his subsequent support of Hans' actions, was there a chance he could be turned to their cause?

Moreover, other subtle signs from those who knew von Manstein well indicated that he held Hitler in contempt. For instance, a few chosen individuals observed him demonstrate a trick he taught his favorite dog. They witnessed von Manstein give the command:

"Heil Hitler," to his dog, the creature responded by raising his right paw into the air. Although this mocking episode could be nothing more than typical contempt for all things non-Prussian, it seemed to indicate that von Manstein did not worship at Hitler's feet.

At this time, several German officers had already concluded that Hitler and his closest associates must die before they succeeded in taking Germany to total ruin. They reasoned that there could be no compromise with this ideological madman. In fact, it appeared his army's shortfalls in Russia drove Hitler even further off a path leading to reason and humanity, which further justified his murder. When the time came for this action, having someone of von Manstein's status on their side might make the difference between success and failure.

von Manstein's Reaction to the Kerch Incident

Previously, von Manstein had rubber stamped reports sent to him by *Einsatzgruppen* (4) D. This was part of the mountains of paperwork someone in his position waded through daily. After the Kerch anti-tank ditch incident came to light, von Manstein wondered to himself if he inadvertently signed off on the mass murder of these thousands of men, women, and children. Perhaps he should cover his tracks better, but could he kill two birds with one stone?

Consequently, after losing Kerch to the advancing Soviet troops, von Manstein sided with Hans and decided to reprimand Otto Ohlendorf,

the commander of *Einsatzgruppen D*. Ohlendorf, after he was told that von Manstein wanted to see him immediately dutifully reported to von Manstein's headquarters. von Manstein waved off Ohlendorf's salute and immediately proceeded directly to the subject at hand:

"An immediate investigation of this Kerch incident will be conducted. If I have to answer to Hitler for the fall of Kerch, then your unit should be prepared to shoulder some blame, too. I have on my desk an execution order I signed for two of my soldiers found guilty of raping an older Russian woman," slamming his fist down on one of the papers on his desk.

"Is it right for Russian civilians and all others to see criminal activity of our soldiers go unpunished? Eleventh Army soldiers are not animals. Furthermore, I am making an emergency declaration. Until our investigation is complete, you and your men are to suspend your activities."

Ohlendorf started to offer a defense but instead just replied:

"Jawohl, Herr General"

"As soon as possible, report your unit to 132nd Division's commander for front line duty. I give you the rest of today to assemble your men and appeal this decision up your chain of command. Make sure by tomorrow afternoon your entire unit is moving toward Sevastopol.

By fighting shoulder to shoulder with my 132nd *Lansers*, your men will try and offset injuries their actions have caused Eleventh Army. General von Ravenstein's investigating officer will be contacting you shortly to record your side of this disaster - dismissed."

#####

It did not take long for Himmler to insist Hans' investigation be put on hold and covered up. However, the fate of Otto Ohlendorf and *Einsatzgruppen D* was another matter. With disaster raining down on their heads, similar orders were issued up and down the Eastern Front that sent support units directly into front-line fighting on an emergency basis.

In this special case, Hitler could not be seen as showing a preference for Himmler's thugs in a time of dire emergency for Eleventh Army with the heavy demands he had placed on von Manstein. Hitler explained to Himmer:

"You know, every soldier in uniform knows it is his duty to assume the role of an infantryman, if a need arises. Also, fewer eye witnesses

to a botched operation might be a good thing, it was become too well known as it is. Moreover, more and more foreign soldiers, including Romanians and Italians, are being sent to aid von Manstein's Eleventh Army. This will increase the likelihood of another embarrassing incident coming to light in the Crimea.

Einsatzgruppen D personnel did their jobs well. I believe the Crimea to be Jew free. Let them help out Eleventh Army for a few days during this critical time. We are indeed very short on replacement troops to send von Manstein. Besides, I am told our transportation network is in shambles due to the worst winter in 100 years."

#####

von Manstein was not as angry at Ohlendorf as he had let on. However, he was gravely concerned about the deteriorating military situation in his area and on the entire Eastern Front. Furthermore, he was determined to use whatever means he could to save his army. Also, quick action to censor Ohlendorf and his unit would quiet von Ravenstein and remove this distraction from Eleventh Army's thoughts.

#####

Like all Eleventh Army units, 132nd Infantry Division was desperately short of personnel due to continued heavy fighting. Luckily, the division's replacement battalion had recently arrived. Now von Manstein informed his 132nd Division commander:

"You are being assigned even more troops in almost battalion strength to help you complete the capture of Fort Stalin. You will be provided all the support we have left."

Immediate use of these fortuitous fresh replacements enabled 132nd Division's general to launch a successful attack on Fort Stalin, a centrally located hilltop strongpoint. Its capture allowed artillery observation of Sevastopol's harbor. This made continuing to supply Sevastopol via the Black Sea a very dangerous undertaking for Soviet ships. After its capture, Soviet artillery and infantry subjected Fort Stalin to numerous counterattacks, but stout 132nd troops, together with their brutal colleagues, continued to hold.

#####

von Manstein passed Himmler's order, countersigned by Hitler, directly to Hans. This order required him to drop his investigation. However, no specific mention was made regarding the disposition of any pertinent materials collected thus far. As Hans looked up from the order, he knew what he must do.

He immediately sent for his division's chief investigating officer. When this officer arrived at division headquarters, he was quickly ushered into Hans' private office. As an orderly shut the door behind him, Hans came directly to the point.

"I have just received a direct order to drop your investigation. Go through your interview list and inform each soldier that he is now under orders to speak no more of this incident to anyone."

Hans knew that this would accomplish nothing, as knowledge of the incident was already too widespread.

"Assemble all your photographs, interviews, and investigation notes. Seal all these materials in a box and pass them to our adjutant as soon as possible - understood? Include all copies and your personal notes. You will move on to your next worklist item and speak no more of this investigation."

"Jawohl, Herr General. It will be done. This issue will be closed out today without further comment."

Before Hans' exposure of this Jewish massacre, most of von Manstein's Eleventh Army soldiers had not paid much attention to the actions of *Einsatzgruppen D*. They took for granted that some unpleasant police work was necessary to reduce partisan activity and keep rear areas safe.

Moreover, most citizens and soldiers in Nazi Germany had become callous to the overuse of such terms as 'Jewish Communist Criminal Activity' by their government. Many citizens and soldiers started to connect the dots regarding the Jewish question. It was common knowledge that asking open questions about unusual goings-on could get a civilian or soldier in a lot of trouble.

#####

In February, 1942, men of *Einsatzgruppen D* were pulled out of the line to return to their bloodthirsty work, but they were destined not to return to Eleventh Army's area. Out of some 650 men, slightly more than 200 unwounded but exhausted survivors remained to march back

down the road from Fort Stalin. Ohlendorf, their commander, was not among these survivors.

Kurt Knispel (6) - Excellent Marksman

Near the Leningrad Front in Northern Russia – Early February, 1942

The tank turret hatch opened, and a young, smiling, diminutive, black-clad tank gunner with wild reddish-blond hair emerged. He jumped off the tank and addressed a nearby officer.

“Herr Lieutenant, how did we do?”

This was not necessary, for Kurt Knispel knew his crew scored well on the range targets. Nevertheless, confirmation must come from this lieutenant.

“Well, Knispel, looks like you and your tank crew recorded our highest score to date, although you have had the least amount of training. Consequently, I will certify your whole crew on Panzer III tanks with a long 50-mm gun today. But don’t get this new tank sunk in a Volkhov Swamp. As soon as the rest of our battalion is certified, we plan on attacking *Second Shock Army*(*Second SA*). ”

“We are ready, sir, but why didn’t Twelfth Panzer Division get these tanks earlier? Maybe we would be sitting in Leningrad right now.”

“You may be right, Knispel. But even now, we would not have such tanks if it hadn’t been for Field Marshall Heinz Guderian’s success in Africa. Not only do we have more tanks, long-range guns, and planes, but his success has brought us a new division. However, we did lose our paratroopers – or what was left of them.

You better take care of this tank. There will probably be no more for quite some time, especially since Heinz has been taken ill. Anyway, from what I hear, this summer’s offensive action will occur in Southern Russia. We must make do with what we have until our turn comes up.”

“You know, sir, we will do our best. I can tell you this; I believe *Second SA* is in for a shock itself.”

End Notes

- (4) Johann Theodor “Hans” von *Ravenstein* (captured 28 November 1941) – Highly decorated, capable, two-war veteran and Twenty-First Panzer Division commander. He was a devout Christian and an outspoken critic of the Nazi regime since the early 1930s, when they first came to power.

He was captured during the African desert Crusader battle and had the distinction of being the first German general captured in World War II.

- (5) *Einsatzgruppen* – Four special groups of soldiers of approximately battalion strength responsible for elimination of Jews and other ‘undesirables’ from the conquered portions of Russia. Frequently, these groups had the help of front-line German Army soldiers in carrying out their bloody assignments.
- (6) Kurt Knispel – Perhaps the greatest tank crewman/commander of all time. Before he was killed, he officially destroyed an incredible total of 168 tanks. Characterized early in his career as a troublemaker, he once attacked a concentration camp guard who was beating an inmate. Even though recommended for high decorations numerous times, he never received proper recognition for his battlefield achievements, due to this incident and other unnazi-like behavior.

CHAPTER 3

Captain Bindy and Admiral Lutizo

Mid March, 1942 - Crimea, Russia

Italian Captain Gian Bindy was stunned when he first heard about Heinz's collapse and his subsequent evacuation from Africa back to Germany. Gian felt that Heinz had accomplished a great deal in the Mediterranean Theater. As far as he was concerned, Heinz was the person who turned things around when he took command after Rommel's untimely death during the Crusader battle in 1941.

Moreover, even though Heinz's battlefield talents were legionary, his real accomplishments, as far as Gian was concerned, were in reorganizing, arming, and training Italian ground forces. Yes, it was because of him that Gian found himself in Russia. Finding Italian soldiers woefully armed for a modern conflict, Heinz was the first to suggest a short-term approach of arming Gian's fellow troops with captured equipment.

Not only had Italians and Germans worked frantically to repair captured British and American tanks from Operation Crusader and earlier battles, but Heinz suggested:

"Let us incorporate captured equipment from other nations, as well. Our industry is unable to keep pace with requirements for upgraded modern war material. I think we should consider some of the extensive equipment captured on the Russian front for our fighting men in Africa."

Earlier Heinz had told Wilhelm:

"I see in 'Giovani Fascisti' (Gian's former regiment), a pool of high-quality leadership material. Chief among these is Lieutenant Bindy. I believe I will take an active interest in his career. After all he speaks German and has our Knight's Cross hanging from his neck."

Consequently, Gian was selected to lead the first recovery team sent to Crimea, Russia, to obtain Soviet equipment for use in Africa. At

first, Gian had not been excited about going to Russia to collect battle-field junk.

In particular, he would miss a certain young Italian colonist, Aldina, daughter of a successful almond farmer near Derna. He hoped she would miss him too, but he was not given time to drop by and say good bye to her. There was also a Luftwaffe nurse at Derna that he wanted to ask out, but never had the opportunity. He could write to Aldina, but he only had the first name of the Luftwaffe nurse.

Off to the Crimea

Over time, his opinion of this new assignment changed as he bought into Heinz's logic of reusing captured Russian equipment and it was indeed challenging. Still, it had not been an easy assignment locating, repairing, and transporting Russian equipment, on top of his normal duties. Also, the endless fighting with Italian and German bureaucrats wore him down, when he failed to avoid them.

His whole Crimea operation was organized from essentially nothing. Later, more help came from Italy, and now, recovery teams were all over Russia. Actually, Germans would probably have done more of this battle-field salvaging, but they were short on manpower and transportation resources.

Italians could not help much with ground transportation concerns, but they could help with manpower. More resources were forthcoming from Italy when they discovered that scavenging former Russia battlefields yielded not only potentially useful weapons, but also basic raw materials.

Italy was a country poorly disposed to making war. Gian knew they were short nearly every critical resource, except people. Even aircraft wrecks, such as were found in Africa, Crete, and now Russia, were valuable sources of aluminum and other alloys. Some of Gian's recovery teams even acquired valuable tungsten alloy from spent German ammunition previously fired at Russian tanks. This new scavenging wrinkle had even piqued Heinz's interest, instructing Gian:

"Recover every ounce you can get your hands on my boy, it is worth more than gold."

On his own, Gian suggested many other enhancements, he told his crews:

"Hundreds of available Russian 45-mm guns are deemed almost unusable by Germans, especially those in burned-out Russian tanks.

We will claim them as scrap metal and ship them to Italy. In Italy, these guns will be reworked to accept a combination Czech/Italian cartridge. This reworked gun will then be fitted to Italian vehicles or fixed installations. With this improved gun, Italian armored vehicles will not be so outclassed. We need to strip anything that may help our comrades, especially in Africa, fight this war.”

However, their most important work was reclaiming Russian heavy and medium tanks. Heinz had suggested in their kickoff meeting:

“Tank allotment to Italians in Africa and Russia will be based upon specific models, to minimize spare parts and training issues. Thus, heavy KV model tanks will go to Africa, where their armor and slower speed is better suited to a mainly defensive role. Excellent T-34 tanks, for the time being should stay in Russia, where Italian services can supply them with diesel fuel and perhaps prevent friendly fire incidents by grouping them all together away from German troops.”

Gian’s mind had raced ahead of even Heinz’s ideas. All these plans were basically in their infancy, along with many more innovations in Africa and other countries. What happens now when the man whose influence had started these changes was out of the picture? Even shipping this equipment out of Russia might be threatened.

As it was, many hours were spent arguing shipping priorities over the vastly overloaded Russian rail system. It would not be long before more Russian tanks were needed in Africa; but only one shipment made it through after months of effort. Gian knew more must be done. This effort could not die just when it was starting to bear fruit.

After sharing his concerns with one of his lieutenants, this man had a suggestion:

“If you are so worried, why don’t you try our newly exiled admiral? Maybe his rank will help with getting the shipments out. Besides, I hear he is highly thought of by Admiral Raeder.”

“I don’t have time to travel to the naval base at Odessa. The division commander already thinks too much time and resources are wasted on my pet scavenging projects.”

“Captain, the good admiral is not in Odessa. I heard he is here, examining the Soviet fort called Maxim Gorki. He is inside Sevastopol as we speak. By truck, you could be there and back in a day. But will he agree to see you?”

“Let me worry about that, lieutenant. If you will cover for me, I will go tomorrow.”

"Don't I always? No one knows where you go anyway? Now, don't forget and start talking German to him, sir."

A New Relationship

On the next day, Gian made it as far as the German defenses inside Sevastopol before he ran up against a certain naval lieutenant who was one of Admiral Lutizo's supply officers.

"He is busy and cannot be disturbed. Come back later." He then looked down at Gian's decorations.

"We don't care about your medals, captain. The admiral is involved in very important work. He thinks these guns can be made to work again and turned on the defenders of Sevastopol."

"If you don't let me see him, then I will talk to the Germans. How would that go over, lieutenant? I speak pretty good German, and they do pay attention to medals."

"Alright, if you insist, but you must go inside the fort and he will not be happy." He pointed toward a rough road that ended in a gaping hole in the side of Maxim Gorki.

"Also, don't blame me if you get shot Captain. Trying to enter Maxim Gorki during daylight hours is extremely hazardous."

As Gian made his way up the road, he could not help but be impressed by this massive fort. Soviet troops had the fort in their artillery range, and Gian saw the shell holes where artillery fire scored recent hits. He scrambled the last few feet through the hole as a couple of snipers took long-range shots at him. One ricocheted off the fort's concrete exterior and raised a cloud of dust.

Once inside, he observed several Italian teams at work. Gian learned from these men where to locate Admiral Lutizo inside this three-story fort. Gian's journey came to an end underneath Maxim Gorki's western gun turret. He saluted Admiral Lutizo.

"Well, it must be pretty important to bring you in here during daylight hours. What can I do for you, my well-decorated captain? I will give you ten minutes."

"Bindy."

"Bindy - in person, you were that brash young officer who captured Tobruk all by yourself? Well, at least you were instrumental in discovering and acquiring Tobruk's radar installation for our examination. Our navy owes you a debt of gratitude. My fleet accomplished what

I felt was a deciding effort against Malta convoys largely because your discovery forced Germans to supply advanced radar technology to us.

Unfortunately, as you have probably heard, my superiors and enemies couldn't get over the fact I disobeyed orders to strike a blow at Malta. Now tell me, what did you do to get yourself transferred here?"

"Well admiral, I did tell one of our generals that nitrogen should be used to kill hardcore holdouts in Tobruk."

"Nitrogen, you don't say? I have never heard of anyone using it as a weapon. Bindy, you appear to have some aptitude for generating novel and deadly ideas."

"Yes, it is colorless, odorless, untraceable, and deadly. I learned about its characteristics while working in industry, but our esteemed general would have none of it. I don't care much for the British, admiral. Poisoning them with nitrogen seemed like a good idea at the time.

Actually, German Field Marshall Heinz Guderian was instrumental in getting me sent to Russia. Believe it or not, I am here to help deal the British another nasty surprise. One of my part-time jobs is to assemble Russian equipment for shipment back for our troops in Africa. That is why I came to see you. I assume you have heard what has happened to Heinz."

"Yes, I have heard; unfortunate and untimely for sure. But my boy, I sense you are too full of hate for your own good. Nitrogen poisoning is a horrific proposal; I would suggest you never mention it again. Perhaps you have spent too much time with our German allies. It is clear some are consumed by their hate, especially their leader. Mark me, it will be their downfall."

Somewhat taken aback by Lutizo's sharp comment, Gian still continued.

"Admiral, let me present my case to you as clearly as I can. After the Operation Crusader battle, Heinz pushed a program to, among other things; make our Italian ground forces more competitive, shall we say. One significant aspect of this agenda was the transfer of certain captured Russian weapons to our troops in the Mediterranean. Many of our troops have labored hard and have overcome many obstacles to procure and repair such equipment.

However, only one major shipment of heavy Russian tanks has made it to Africa. We get resistance and excuses from all levels. And I fear that absent Heinz's push, we will never make another significant shipment. I know you are quite busy with other matters, but your help

would be greatly appreciated. My division will be sent north after we remove Russians from the Eastern Crimea, and I feel all our shipping plans will unravel in my absence. Will you consider helping? I have brought copies of some of the shipping details with me.”

“Well, we Italians should stick together in this distant land. I have begun to work closely with our Air Force contingent, why not the Army, too? Allow me some time to study your documents. I do have a certain influence with our air and, of course, sea transport services. If some of these weapons can be back loaded into our ships and aircraft, then I can probably offer you a small amount of immediate assistance.

Also, I have developed a fair relationship with Grand Admiral Raeder, a no-nonsense naval officer. He seems to be under the impression that sending a person of my rank to Russia was an indication of how important my superiors think this operation is. Actually, it was a slap on my hand for what our high command considered reckless behavior. It seems Germans may take a different view toward battlefield initiative.”

“Admiral, then you do think you could convince Raeder and those in charge of our merchant fleet about the importance of back loading Russian tanks and equipment to Africa?”

“Perhaps, Raeder is more insightful than some of the other German bumpkins in charge of policy. He seems to run his own show without concern for Nazi leadership. He claims he even keeps Jewish naval officers on duty and supports an especially controversial German Lutheran minister. How is that for trying to identify the good in this war? He understands the consequences if Italy is knocked out of the war, and he also realizes that this whole Axis adventure is only one wrong decision step away from total disaster.”

With every word Admiral Lutizo was carefully observing Gian's facial expressions and body language. Apparently Gian could care less what he thought, only what was he willing to do?

“So I say, young captain, Raeder may be one alternative to your lost sponsor. Raeder realizes the strategic significance of the Mediterranean, but equally important to him is gaining control of the Black Sea. He told me that opening a separate supply route across the Black Sea could save the Russian campaign. He even asked for Italian help, if you can believe that, the Grand Admiral of the whole German Navy. So we may acquire some Italian ships to support your activities.”

“Is this why you have taken such an interest in Sevastopol, admiral?”

“Yes. But with the Turkish military blockade, Italy can only send some small vessels and midget submarines by truck to us. It would be hard to develop a real Italian naval presence with such small forces to make Raeder’s dream a reality. But who knows? There is no doubt that our MAS(Italian frogman naval service) has performed some very profound feats in the past that got Raeder’s attention. To my way of thinking, it should not be hard to backload our supply vessels with your Russian equipment. However, for such a plan to work, Black Sea shipping lanes must be free from danger.

This cannot be done completely until Sevastopol and the Black Sea coastal ports are conquered. That is why I am trying to get this fort working again to aid in Sevastopol’s capture. My men have made excellent progress, but time is running out. Bindy, come with me to the top of this fort I will show you what we are faced with. But keep a sharp eye out for Soviet snipers – most deadly. Take them very seriously, or you will never make it back to Italy alive.”

With Lutizo leading the way, neither spoke another word until they had finished the climb to the top of the fort.

On Top of Maxim Gorki I (one of two identical forts that had been built to guard Sevastopol from sea attack)

“This is an impressive view, admiral.”

Gian carefully peeked to the side of the massive gun turret and took in a splendid view of the harbor and bay in the distance on a shimmering late winter day. He breathed in the refreshing smell of salt water, which was far preferable to the stench experienced inside parts of the fort.

“It looks like you can control most of the harbor, city, and far bank with these guns. Can we see the damaged Russian battleship I have heard about from here?”

“Just her upper parts are visible. Cast your gaze toward the harbor entrance.” He pointed with his right hand.

“That, my young captain, is one thing we can be proud of as Italians. Our Savoia torpedo bombers disabled the most powerful Russian ship in the Black Sea, *Parizhskayaya Kommuna*. She is beached in such a position that her guns cannot be trained on us here. However, if von Manstein tries an assault across Sevastopol Bay, her guns could make it very difficult, if not impossible.

We are waiting on the final placement of large German mortars to pound her and north Sevastopol’s remaining forts into dust. Intelligence

reports indicate the Soviets are trying to float her again, even though her guns may be as worn as Maxim Gorki's already replaced barrels lying over there."

Lutizo pointed to the other side of the turret where Gian could see two large barrels laying roughly parallel to each other, partially covered with dust and debris.

"I hear that the last time she tried to provide fire support, her guns were largely ineffective. My guess is that she fired her last accurate shot sometime in December during von Manstein's last concerted effort to capture Sevastopol. Maybe the Soviets were so desperate they felt they had to use her for one last trip, worn guns and all."

All of a sudden Gian envisioned a flood of ideas.

"Admiral, if *Parizhskayaya Kommuna* is so important, why not capture her? You could repair her and make her your Black Sea flagship."

"Yes, an interesting idea. We actually have considered it, but fighting our way into the harbor with our small naval contingent would probably result in a massacre, similar to what happened to our MAS raiders when they attacked Malta. Gian, if they kill my entire small naval contingent, how would we handle our other activities? You could forget us helping you too, if we are dead. No, it is simply not possible."

"Admiral, there is a company of German Brandenburgers, the Eighth, with nearly 300 men available to base such an attack entirely on subterfuge. At Odessa, aren't there some small Soviet vessels available that would be suitable for such a raid? Your naval personnel need only master these Soviet vessels. I can contact and sent their leader to see you.

I don't believe brandenburgers have ever captured a battleship. It would be a first for them and would get their attention. There is nothing like changing the course of a war to get a man's allegiance. For the sake of argument, let's say such a raid is doable and you are able to capture this battleship while von Manstein's troops are taking Sevastopol. Could you get her running again?"

Admiral Lutizo took a moment to answer as he fully digested Gian's proposal.

"What you are proposing might be possible and we might have enough time to plan it and pull it off. We Italians do have a lot of experience in restoring torpedoed ships, and I know just the engineers that could help with such a project - can't tell your German friends, though.

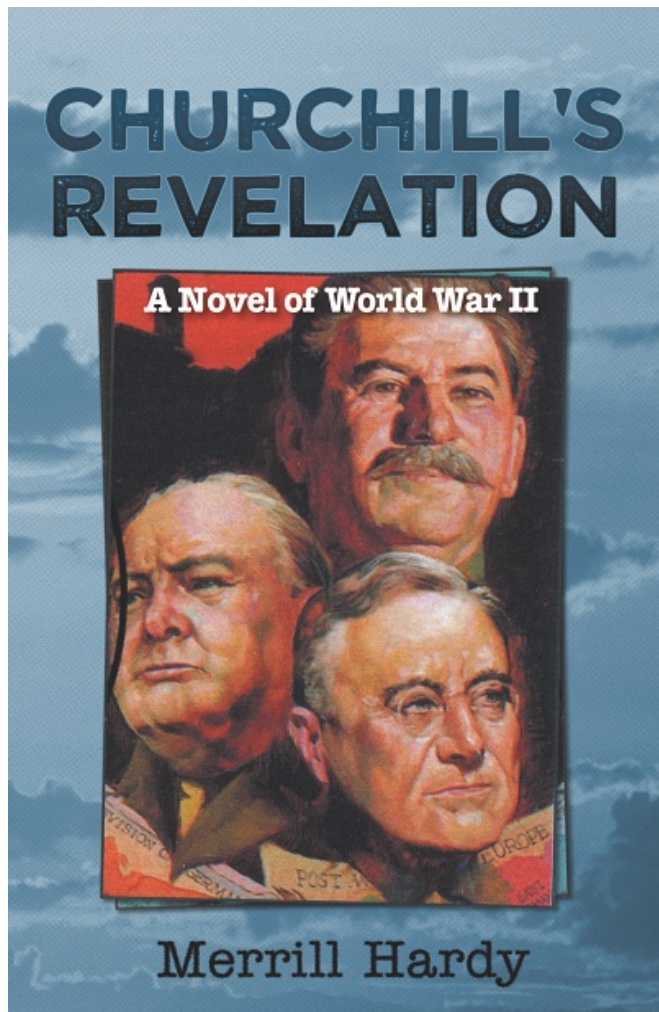
The lead engineer is Jewish. Send your brandenburger friend to me as soon as you can, I will hear him out.

Let us hope your time with me proves as lucrative as my time has with you, but your ten minutes are up. From what you told me, your endeavors sound most important to the overall Italian war effort. One of my officers will stay in touch. I may even loan you a few of my own men to assist you with your efforts. Sounds like a good excuse to see the rest of Russia.”

“Admiral, I would like to thank you for your time and help. By the way, if you and I can break free again, I would like to hear your take on an overall Italian war strategy, now that we are at war with the whole world. Maybe you could tell me how you plan on finding something positive amid all this evil.”

“I will be glad to, my young, idea-generating captain. Who knows what God has entrusted us with in these most terrible of times? We, of course, are Italians first. But I would really like to be fighting for more than just a larger Italian empire. To be honest, I do not care much for Hitler. He’s too much like a more evil Mussolini twin. Godless like Stalin, is what I have heard.

However, the more I see of these Soviets and their cruel system of government and ways of waging war, the less I would care to fall into their unmerciful hands. Most Russian citizens seem overjoyed, at least at first, to no longer be under Stalin’s boot heel and more than willing to aid us. How is that for something positive? But let us survive first, and then we can talk about what our future may hold. God go with you.”



In 1941-42 the British Empire endures such crushing setbacks that Winston Churchill is driven to seek divine guidance. Prompted to increase his Pacific commitment following the Battle of Midway; giving rise to some unusual and unexpected outcomes.

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