

TEAMWORK

The Blitzkrieg, in the words of the German Officers Who Put It Across

did it

By FAIRFAX DOWNEY



A German tank crossing the Ourcq River. Below, a troop carrier with caterpillar tread rumbles through a captured town



THUNDER rumbles, lightning flashes and strikes. Incredibly swiftly it is over. So, compared to the campaigns of the First World War, was the German Blitzkrieg, rumbling, flashing and striking down Poland, Norway, Holland, Belgium, and France. How did it work? What made it click?

Air superiority and improved weapons. The fast, hard-hitting motorized columns and the stealthy, treacherous Fifth Columns. First-rate tactics, long-planned strategy, and fine staff work. All these add up into the answer, given by the Nazis themselves. A stream of published German military documents has been flowing into our War Department where they have been translated.

On these documents are based the following battle-pieces.

WE HAVE been in Corps Reserve, but tonight we are marching up to relieve troops in the line. A motorcycle courier roars back from up ahead with orders for our battalion commander. We move faster through the night, and the word for silence passes down the ranks. The gloom of forest shrouds us. As we emerge from it, we discern dark heaps on the ground—enemy dead, the first our young soldiers have seen. The lads eye the bodies nervously and glance toward us World War veterans. To us it is an old story. Our calm bearing steadies the youngsters.

Now we are close up. Before dawn we are dug in, crouched in foxholes and none too soon, for with dawn a barrage cracks down on us. Our artillery blazes back, but those gunners on the ridge are really good.

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soon our batteries spoil the accuracy of the foe's fire. Prepare to attack. It is a tough nut we have to crack. Concrete emplacements, machine-gun nests with flanking fire, tank traps and barriers of iron rails set in concrete, and barbed wire entanglements on a dominating crest which must be approached through a depression 800 meters wide. And we have only an infantry battalion with two rifle companies to deliver the assault!

But we are to have help. Thunder overhead, and here comes a whole squadron of our bombers. They swoop, motors roaring, sirens shrieking. Hits or not, that racket must be ruinous to the nerves of the lads over there. Tons of high explosive are dropped, black geysers spurt high into the air. Only one bomber is downed by anti-aircraft.

Yet still our attack is withheld. We are to risk no more lives than we must. Our planes and artillery give it to 'em again. And now we are off.

Our heavy-machine-gun platoon, along with light infantry cannon, opens on their machine-gun nests. Our three anti-tank guns spit shells at their observation turrets. Under this fire we advance by rushes. Flanking machine-gun fire catches us, but we burrow into the soft earth of a potato patch.

Crash-bang! Our artillery, damn it, is firing short into us. Green rockets up, quick! Good! The fire is lifted.

Up and at 'em! The sinking sun is red behind us, but the town to the rear of the foe is as crimson with flames and the blast of shells. Our right platoon cuts through the wire, finds a gap in their line. In one hour and ten minutes since the launching of the assault, the concrete fort is ours.

A BROAD river barred our path. Vainly had we tried to force a passage by a surprise attack. It was shattered by the fire of our adversaries from buildings of the town over there and fortified positions on the bank.

We must try again. Our companies move up at night, while the engineer platoon prepares three large and two small inflatable rubber boats. Handy things, these. We could use more of them.

The enemy is not asleep. Forty minutes before our barrage is due he gives

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A German mechanized column swings along a dirt road. In the right background note the motorcyclist who is ready to ride back to get help from the artillery if the column finds the going too tough

utes before our barrage is due he gives us a heavy barrage at 3.20 A.M. from cannon and heavy infantry mortars. In spite of that we press on into a town on our side of the river. There, civilians, firing from barns and roofs, give us a smart fight. Part of a company mops them up, but a barn catches fire, destroying our artillery observation and forcing our heavy machine guns from position. It's going to be harder going now.

As our barrage is laid down, two companies launch their inflated rafts. The first crosses without loss. The second is forced back but covers the first company with rifle and machine-gun fire. Then the Third Company makes a great find—a barge which dum-heads among the

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enemy neglected to sink. It's anchored in midstream, but the company secures it and crosses safely.

Volley's still flame from the brush and the houses of the town. Our artillery, unable to observe, can help us little. Yet by hard fighting we establish a bridgehead which battalion HQ organizes. Steadily the rubber boats ply back and forth.

The 6th Company is over now. Suddenly a superior hostile force clashes with it in the thick brush. It's touch and go. In the nick of time the 2d Company, which had managed to cross, comes to the rescue. The two companies close the bridgehead. Resistance slackens, and we bring over the rest of our troops. We're across! The river is behind us. We march on.

TWO motorcycle companies. Two platoons of anti-tank guns, motorized, and armored cars. In support, platoons of combat engineers and accompanying guns. That was our outfit, and our job was to feel the way for the infantry divisions and scout (Continued on page 40) the enemy's strength. Our motors sputter, and we speed ahead. Here's a road blocked by mined tree barricades. We simply skirt it and leave the engineers to clean it up.

Action comes thick and fast. Our armored cars drive the enemy back. Though one of our units is caught in a wood by artillery fire, we entrench and suffer only one minor casualty. One of our tank regiments comes up and plunges through.

Laying up by night, we push on by day, little bothered by enemy planes. We fan out over the roads, sending back frequent reports to our advancing columns and keeping them in touch with each other. We do not only scout, we fight. One of our armored cars dashes into a town and puts an enemy tank out of action. Close behind comes our infantry, and the town is taken. We find a dynamited bridge but quickly locate another still intact. Our couriers divert the column behind, and the advance is unhampered.

Late one afternoon we speed into a town full of hostile troops. Our advance patrols let them have it with hand grenades and automatic rifles. Anti-tank guns and light grenade projectors complete their rout. But our turn for trouble comes later when they get a direct hit on an ammunition vehicle of our heavy weapons platoon.

Keeping in touch by radio, we push our reconnaissances and as we do so re-

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An Image of the 1940 Blitzkrieg: the 7th Panzer Rolls Through France

pulse attacks, once even putting an armored train to flight with an anti-tank gun. All along we gather in prisoners and booty, taken off our hands by the troops behind.

So we drive on, scouting and fighting for fifteen days. After one last strenuous march of 300 kilometres, they let us rest behind a division come up to besiege a town. We sleep in the open, like dead men. The motorized war of movement is over.

RADIO was fairly primitive in the last war, but in this one it proves its worth. We find we cannot depend on motorcycle couriers. They get spilled by bad roads or shot by snipers. Radio must carry the burden.

The mobile stations of our communications battalion are manned by skilful operators. They successfully contend with interference caused by weather changes and with jamming by hostile wireless.

If any one of our stations breaks down or is put out of action, reserve apparatus is rushed up to take its place. They are constantly shifting the assignments of our crews and changing the code on us, but not once do we fail to keep communication between flanks and rear.

Some of our stations are transferred; one is lost in a fog. But all tactical and administrative control of the advancing division is through us. Our operators bend over their instruments sending and receiving with difficulty while their vehicles jolt along. Some of them, who have been at their sets four days and nights without relief, fall asleep, and the commanders of the radio units must get them back on the job and check carefully against errors. But all the heavy radio traffic is handled. The division, always in touch with higher command and with its own units, moves on to win its objective.

BLITZKRIEG*The Panzer II in Open Country*

ENTER and hold the railroad station until the infantry arrives.”

Those are the orders for our armored train crew. Hidden by a fog, we puff into the station. Bridges we crossed had been mined, but we were too quick. A detachment climbs off to capture the yards.

Then trouble starts. The enemy blows up a bridge behind us. He opens up on us with everything he has—machine guns, infantry cannon, and anti-tank guns. We must shunt the train a little, back over a viaduct. Toward it rush enemy troops with demolition charges. Twice, first with machine guns then with hand grenades, we mow them down. Cannon aboard the train thunder. The train moves backward and forward so as not to be a stationary target for their gunners. Even so they have the range.

A terrific explosion rends us. The train has run onto a mined bridge just as its charge is detonated. One car topples from the bridge, a second is off the track. We uncouple it, order the train forward. Not an inch will it move! A battery begins to adjust on us at short range. We tumble out of the train, set up our machine guns and let fly.

Then—and just in time—our infantry comes up. What is more, it has supporting artillery. Our men close in on the town, and the foe flees.

THE enemy had been retreating, but now he is standing and counter-attacking. German artillery, trench mortars, and heavy machine guns blast away. The attack is momentarily halted but threatens to come on again. Ammunition for the heavy machine guns is running low.

The German battalion commander turns to one of his runners.

“Grab a truck,” he orders. “Find the combat train and bring up ammunition belts. Fast!”

The runner gets a truck and driver. Back they hum over heavily-shelled roads. No sign of the combat train.

They never find the combat train but reach the divisional supply point.

“Ammunition belts!” shouts the runner.



Stuka Dive-Bombers over France

“Have you a permit to receive them?” asked the non com in charge.

“*Mein Gott!*” yells the runner. “Think I’m here on a pleasure trip?” He gets the ammunition.

Back speeds the truck with thirty boxes. They are carried up to the front line by rushes—which takes some doing.

“Now let ’em come on,” they say.

They do come on, but the heavy machine guns begin their deadly chatter, and the attack reels back, finished.

ARTILLERY observers are ordered to report to the commander of the infantry battalion their battery is supporting in an attack on a fortified position. No telephone wires, so easily shot out, are laid—not this war. The observers take along a portable radio set with two operators.

Here is the infantry, under cover in a sunken road. The chief observer reports, and his field glasses sweep the enemy positions in a search for a target. Nothing at first, nothing worth firing on with his heavy howitzers. But now he sights a large body of hostile infantry.

“Get the battery!”

The radio set crackles. An operator reports he is through to the battery just as the firing data is computed. Back flash the commands. The shells scream overhead and burst directly on the target. Our infantry cheers wildly as it advances and with it the artillery party.

But hostile artillery fire smashes in from three sides.

A counter-attack is mustering in the ravines. Quickly the remaining artillery officer estimates and sends back data by radio. Observe and report, he is ordered, and the battery fires.

Shellbursts flower in smoke and flame. Short. Increase the range 100 meters. That does it. Salvos crash into the attacking waves. For twenty minutes they take it and try to keep coming on. Then they are done. Again the German infantry cheers its artillery.

THUS and so, as illustrated by these bits of action, worked the German Blitzkrieg. Often it was aided by the weakness and unpreparedness of opponents, by their fatal mistakes, by treachery from within. But its smooth efficiency, its tenacity, and its marvelous teamwork are not to be gainsaid, and they are points worth study.