

Appendix G - Communications and the Stalingrad 'Kessel'

The most famous battle of the war on the eastern front was at Stalingrad in 1942 and 1943, and it was during those momentous months of attack and counter-attack that the non-morse communications system first came into use by German army units in the Soviet Union. At the core of Hitler's strategy for 1942 were deep thrusts into the south of the Soviet Union, towards the Caucasus, where he sought oil, and towards the Volga and beyond. His response to the challenge of space was to raise the stakes and gamble on as much space again. On the Volga lay the city of Stalingrad. It was not an important military target, just one more city to be taken under control and handed on to the extermination squads which followed immediately behind the German army. The objectives were the forward march to acquire territory and to annihilate the Soviet army, which was again assessed to be on the point of collapse. The German army was expected to move forward very quickly and the headquarters of the German army groups involved in the assault might well need to move locations. It was in this second phase of the assault on the Soviet Union, one of history's blackest episodes, that the new radio and teleprinter system was widely used. Telephone and telegraph wires and poles were erected for the advance, but the ebb and flow of the fronts made radio communications a necessity.

The headquarters of the Army Group South was to over 1500 kilometres from the headquarters of army command near Koenigsberg. The second non-Morse system to be detected by British interception units, providing radio communications on part of the link between the Baltic and Black seas, came into service in November 1942 to provide communications to Army Group South in its drive into the Soviet Union's expectedly soft underbelly. Over the next year half-a-dozen other non-morse links came into use on the eastern front linking army and army group headquarters.

Although the German advance covered spectacular distances in the drive towards the Caucasus, the neighbouring advance to the Volga became bogged down in fierce resistance around Stalingrad and the epic battle for that battered city fired the passions of both sides. The German assault was led by the 6th Army, part of 'Army Group B'. The headquarters of the army group, some distance to the west, and of the 6th Army were connected by 'field cable' buried in the ground, allowing voice and teleprinter communications to and from the forces besieging Stalingrad. The city's capture or successful holding out would take on a significance that was out of all proportion to its military importance. Stalingrad may not have been the most decisive military battle of the war, but it was undoubtedly the most important in terms of propaganda. German intelligence failed to appreciate the forces the enemy could muster, estimating again that the Soviet army had run out of soldiers and weapons. Hitler all but announced the capture of Stalingrad. Yet, as happened the year before at Moscow, the Soviet army had gathered substantial reserves for another unexpected counterblow - one which signified Soviet potential to reverse the roles of the two colossal war machines. The German 6th Army under Paulus was treated to a Soviet display of how to carry out a pincer movement. In German such an encirclement is a 'kessel', usually translated as 'kettle' or 'cauldron',

though the term also refers to a basin-shaped valley and as well to a semi-circular ring of hunters slowly enclosing their prey. In military usage the circle is completed and there is no escape.

In one way the siege of the 6th Army presaged some aspects of modern warfare, where we have become used to television and radio reporters broadcasting, often live, from within war zones – Beirut, Sarajevo, Baghdad spring to mind – rousing public sympathy for the plight of those on the receiving end. For while quite a few of Paulus's soldiers (and their Soviet prisoners) starved to death, and the German army's supply of armaments dried up preventing effective defence against the surrounding Soviet troops, those caught up in the kessel did at least have ample communications facilities. Paulus commented that without the signals corps it wouldn't have been possible to "hold the kessel". In that case, in one sense at least, he may have been better off without such modern communications - Hitler's order to stay put might not have been received and the encirclement avoided. But Paulus did receive the order and obey it he did, organizing his forces in the expectation of rescue. And if he had disobeyed the Fuehrer's instructions, the chances are that the siege would have happened anyway. "In an age when every headquarters was in constant touch by radio, courier and teleprinter, the order for the commander's arrest would be communicated immediately."¹

The German troops couped up in the kessel also had their own interception and cryptanalytic unit which successfully broke the field ciphers of the surrounding Soviet armies up till mid-December 1942; the intercepted messages giving forewarning of Soviet attacks.² However, neither codebreaking nor modern communications technology did the 6th Army much good. There had to be daytime radio silence within the kessel – any transmitter would immediately attract the attention of Soviet intercept teams with direction finding equipment, leading in turn to artillery attack. Instead the 6th Army used its own communications network of cables. The 'field cable' system ran from each of the main command posts to other posts with a mesh of connections ensuring that every unit had at least three independent communications channels (see diagram 6.2). For the first three days there was even a cable link that went outside the kessel. After the Soviet troops discovered the cable communications to German forces to the outside world were based on radio communications during the night.

For the first few weeks of the siege aircraft could enter and leave the kessel bringing in supplies and taking out the wounded. Fellgiebel, ordered a short wave transmitter system – known by the code name 'Saegefisch' – to be flown in allowing radio telephone and radio teleprinter transmission. An antenna was erected each night under cover of darkness and taken down before dawn. Soldiers, when they learnt of the link, queued up to use the radio telephone to call back to Germany. One soldier was even married to his sweetheart at home via the radio link. Its main purpose was to help the defence of the kessel however. In that the link brought first good news – a planned rescue bid by the battle-hardened Field Marshall von Manstein. Then it brought bad news – the failure of Manstein's attempts to break through the surrounding forces.

On the 23rd December 1942, Paulus, caught up in the kessel, and Manstein, well outside it, discussed the situation by teleprinter 'conference' over the radio link. "Paulus asked whether he had finally received permission for the 6th Army to break out. Manstein replied that he still had not obtained agreement from supreme headquarters. He was sparing with the details. If Paulus had been given sufficient information to update his operations map, he would have seen that the 6th Army was beyond help."³

¹ A Beevor, *Stalingrad: the Fateful Siege 1942-1943*, London 1998, 276

² W Arnold, *Bericht an Fellgiebel ueber den Einsatz der Nachrichtentruppe in Stalingrad*, in K Wildhagen

³ A Beevor, *Stalingrad*, 302