

3RD AND 23RD Panzer Divisions at Kharkov - 1942

After the exhausting clashes of the winter months, both Soviet and Axis forces spent the early spring preparing for further offensives. In the Soviet case this was to be an extension of their winter campaign. A two pronged thrust, north out of the Izyum 'bulge' and northwest - and then south - out of the area north east of Kharkov, was intended to encircle the city and recapture a swathe of territory that would give even greater scope for future counter offensives. However, the Germans too had their plans. Unfortunately for the Soviets, these also centred on the southern theatre of operations. The Axis offensive, Operation Friderikus, was to be the precursor to Operation Blau (Blue), the twin-pronged drive on Stalingrad and the Caucasus. Thus German forces in the assault area were stronger and better prepared to deal with the Soviet attacks than had been anticipated.

To counter the Soviet thrusts in the north, 6th Army concentrated the newly arrived 23rd Panzer Division and the remnants of 3rd Panzer Division in the city of Kharkov, ready to move them to threatened sectors as the Soviet offensive developed.

The armoured force of 3rd Panzer rested in Panzer KampfAbteillungeilung Ziervogel, which was, as its name suggests, a battalion-size kampfguppe formed from the available tanks and based around 6th Panzer Regiment's 3rd Battalion. On May 5th the tank strength of this unit was as opposite:

3rd Panzer had received some of the new long-gunned Panzer IIIs, but was still relatively weak and yet to be built up to the three battalions it would field for the summer offensive in June.

When the Soviet 38th Army attacked southeast of Kharkov on 12th May, the 3rd Panzer battle-group was sent with 23rd Panzer (see next page) to blunt and then throw back the enemy thrusts. To achieve this aim it was teamed with 211th and 191st Regiments of 71st Infantry Division, each probably consisting of two infantry battalions with regimental support.

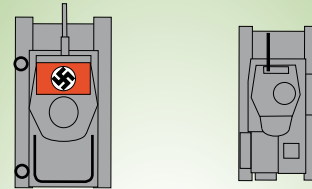
German withdrawals had allowed the Soviet 266th Rifle

Below: More traffic problems. Pz IIIs from a 23rd Panzer light company stuck behind a recovery Famo 18 tonne halftrack.

PANZER KAMPFABTEILUNG ZIERVOGEL 3RD PANZER DIVISION (5TH MAY 1942)

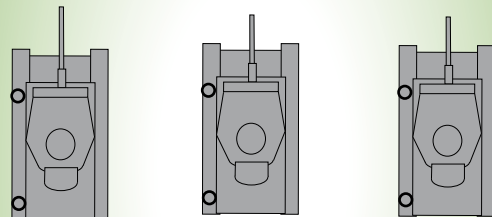
HQ

Panzer III (command), Panzer II (20mm)



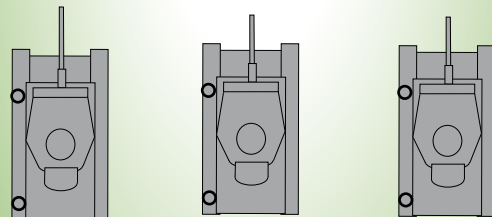
Light Company

Panzer III (long 50mm), 2 x Panzer III (short 50mm)



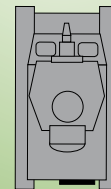
Light Company

Panzer III (long 50mm), 2 x Panzer III (short 50mm)



Medium Company

Panzer IV (short 75mm)



Division to advance within 12 miles of Kharkov, but this had merely drawn the Soviet assault troops onto more favourable ground for a German counter move. Attacking at 11.00hrs on 13th May, the 3rd Panzer-led force struck 622nd regiment of 124th Rifle Division head on near Chevona Roga, driving it back and exposing the flank of 266th Rifle Division.

