STALINGRAD
ONE CITY TOO FAR

In June of 1941, Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, his surprise invasion of the Soviet Union. For most of the next year, the German army routed the Soviet troops, capturing millions of Soviet prisoners, and thousands of square miles of their country in the process. Hitler reveled that his dream of "lebensraum" for the German people was being realized. As the invading German armies advanced deeper and deeper into the Soviet Union, however, the German Fuhrer's gaze fell upon a place whose name would enter the history books. The battle fought there would, perhaps, be the greatest and most epic battle fought in history.

By the middle of 1942, the German Sixth Army had pushed all the way to the banks of the Volga River, near the industrial heartland of the Soviet Union. Once captured, the Nazis could sever the Volga, and potentially destroy Moscow's ability to continue fighting. All they had to do was take one more city-Stalingrad.

Stretching about 30 miles along the banks of the Volga River, Stalingrad was a large industrial city producing armaments and tractors and was an important prize in itself for the invading German army. Capturing the city would cut Soviet transport links with southern Russia, and Stalingrad would then serve to anchor the northern flank of the larger German drive into the oil fields of the Caucasus.

Though Stalingrad carried significant military importance, the psychological importance both Hitler and Stalin placed on the city elevated it to a level of importance above perhaps even the capital city of Moscow. The price both armies were willing to pay to possess it transcended military utility and entered fully into the category of obsession. Because the city bore the name of his archenemy, Joseph Stalin, Hitler took particular interest in capturing the city as a personal hit on the Soviet leader. Stalin, likewise, placed great importance on holding the city to prevent Hitler from capturing the city carrying his name.

To destroy Soviet forces in the south once and for all, secure the region's economic resources, and then wheel his armies north to finally capture Moscow, Hitler, henceforth, launched a new offensive, Fall Blau or Operation Blue.

The offensive would be undertaken by Army Group South under Field Marshal Fedor von Bock. On June 28, 1942, operations began with significant German victories. On July 9, Hitler altered his original plan and ordered the simultaneous capture of both the Caucasus with their vital oil fields *and* the city of Stalingrad. Army Group South was split into Army Group A, under Field Marshal Wilhelm List, and Army Group B, under Bock. As the offensive slowed, Bock was replaced at the head of Army Group B by Field Marshal Maximilian von Weichs. The division of forces placed tremendous pressure on an already-strained logistical support system. It also caused a gap between the two forces, allowing Soviet troops to escape encirclement and retreat to the east. As Army Group A captured Rostov, it penetrated deeply into the Caucasus. Army Group B made slower progress toward Stalingrad, however. Consequently, Hitler intervened in the operation again and reassigned Gen. Hermann Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army to assist in the capture of Stalingrad. As the offensive progressed, Hitler, in fact, continued to directly intervene at the operational level, changing orders almost daily and creating chaos and consternation within the German High Command.

A column of German Stug III armoured fighting vehicles shown approaching Stalingrad, August 1942.

Even with Hitler's incessant interference, the offensive made progress. As German forces slugged forward toward Stalingrad, Stalin issued Order No. 227 on July 28, decreeing that the defenders at Stalingrad would take "Not One Step Back." He also refused the evacuation of any civilians, stating that the army would fight harder knowing that they were defending residents of the city, including many of their own wives and children.

By the middle of August, the German Fourth Army's northeastward advance against the city was converging with the eastward advance of the Sixth Army, under Gen. Friedrich Paulus, with 330,000 of the German army's finest troops. The Red Army, however, put up a determined resistance, yielding ground only very slowly and at a high cost to the Sixth Army as it approached Stalingrad.

Nonetheless, on August 23, a German spearhead penetrated the city's northern suburbs while the Luftwaffe rained tons upon tons of incendiary bombs destroying most of the city's wooden housing. The Soviet Sixty-Second Army was pushed back through Stalingrad, where, under the command of General Vasily Chuikov, it made the German attackers pay dearly for every city block.

By mid-September, the Germans had pushed the Soviet forces in Stalingrad back until the latter occupied only a 9-mile-long by two-mile-wide strip of the city along the Volga. The Soviets had to supply their troops by barge and boat across the Volga from the other bank while under constant attack by the Luftwaffe. A Soviet collapse seemed eminent.

German troops of the 6th Army moving into the suburbs of Stalingrad, 1942.

The Germans continued to attack the city and its stubborn defenders with almost uncontested bombardment from the sky, tanks, artillery, mortars, and other heavy weapons. As a result of the enormous bombardment, the city and its buildings had been pulverized into one giant heap of rubble. The Russians, however, began to develop defensive tactics that took advantage of the wrecked buildings, which ironically gave them numerous advantages. Soviet troops converted various ruins into a series of well-defended strong-points. Fighting at the Red October Steel Factory and at the grain elevator was especially savage. The Stalingrad Tractor Factory continued to turn out T-34 tanks up until German troops burst into the plant and the workers joined in the fight. On September 12th, the railway station changed hands 14 times in six hours of fighting. By the following evening, the Soviet 13th Guards Rifle Division fought to the last man and had ceased to exist. With little concern for casualties, Soviet losses were constantly refreshed by bringing additional troops over the Volga. When a position was lost, an immediate attempt was usually made by the Red Army to re-take it. The defenders contested every remaining brick of Stalingrad while inflicting heavy losses on the German attackers.

German troops preparing for an assault on a warehouse in Stalingrad, September 1942.

At that point, Stalingrad became the scene of some of the fiercest and bloodiest fighting of the war. Streets, blocks, and individual buildings were fought over by many small units of troops and often changed hands again and again. The city's remaining buildings were pounded into rubble by the unrelenting close combat. The barbarity of the fighting on both sides of the line began to transcend all bounds of human behavior. A brutal hand-to-hand

battle took hold inside the city. As they fought from house to house and street to street, the Germans found that all of the tactical advantages they had possessed in fighting across the open steppes of Russia were lost in the close confines of the city. Tanks and the mechanized strategy of Blitzkrieg counted for nothing in urban warfare. Because of the close proximity within the large city, the maneuverability of the tank was impossible and not effective. Paradoxically, a sniper was more effective than a tank. Time and time again, soldiers used knives, bayonets, and often bare hands to kill each other. Bitter fighting raged for every ruin, street, factory, house, basement, and staircase. Even the sewers were the sites of firefights.

The Germans, calling this unseen urban warfare Rattenkrieg or "Rat War," bitterly joked about capturing the kitchen but still fighting for the living room and the bedroom. Buildings had to be cleared room by room through the bombed-out debris of residential neighborhoods, office blocks, basements, and apartment high-rises. Some of the taller buildings, blasted into roofless shells by earlier German aerial bombardment, saw floor-by-floor, close quarters combat, with the Germans and Soviets on alternate levels, firing at each other through holes in the floors. Right and wrong, morality, and honor among combatants had ceased to exist. The battle had literally descended into an animalistic struggle to survive.

Soviet defenders amidst the rubble of Stalingrad, October 1942.

German troops shown in close quarters house-to-house combat at Stalingrad, 1942.

The turning point of the battle came with a huge Soviet counteroffensive on November 19. As the German Sixth and Fourth Armies fought in close combat in the heart of Stalingrad, Soviet planners Generals Georgy Zhukov, Aleksandr Mikhailovich Vasilevskiy, and Nikolay Nikolayevich Voronov had noticed weaknesses on the German flanks. The Soviet onslaught was launched in two spearheads, some 50 miles north and south of the German salient whose tip was at Stalingrad.

The counteroffensive utterly surprised the Germans, who thought the Soviets incapable of mounting such an attack. The operation was a "deep penetration" maneuver, attacking not the main German force at the forefront of the battle for Stalingrad—but instead hitting the weaker flanks. Those flanks were vulnerably exposed on the open steppes surrounding the city and were weakly defended by undermanned, undersupplied, overstretched, and undermotivated Romanian, Hungarian, and Italian troops.

The attacks quickly penetrated deep into the flanks. Axis forces crumbled and by November 23 the two prongs of the attack had linked up at Kalach, about 60 miles west of Stalingrad; the encirclement of the two German armies in Stalingrad was complete.

Soviet Katyusha rockets being fired at German positions in Stalingrad, November 1942.

The German high command frantically urged Hitler to allow Paulus and his forces of the Sixth Army to break out of the encirclement and rejoin the main German forces west of the city, but Hitler would not contemplate a retreat from the Volga River and ordered Paulus to "stand and fight" until reinforcements arrived. With winter setting in and food and medical supplies dwindling, Paulus's forces grew weaker.

Reassured by Hermann Goering that the Luftwaffe could supply the German forces in Stalingrad by air, in mid-December, Hitler ordered one of the most-talented German commanders, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, to form a special army corps to rescue Paulus's forces by fighting its way eastward in what was known as Operation Winter Storm. At the same time, Hitler refused to let Paulus fight his way westward in order to link up with Manstein. That fatal decision doomed Paulus's forces, since Manstein's forces then simply lacked the necessary reserves needed to break through the Soviet encirclement single-handedly. Operation Winter Storm failed and attempts to supply German forces in the city by air were a fiasco.

After repulsing Manstein's efforts, the Soviets then resumed the offensive to shrink the pocket of encircled Germans, to head off any further relief efforts, and to set the stage for the final capitulation of the Germans in Stalingrad. The Volga River was now frozen over solid,

and Soviet forces and equipment were sent over the ice at various points within the city. Hitler exhorted the trapped German forces to fight to the death, going so far as to promote Paulus to field marshal, and reminding Paulus that no German officer of that rank had ever surrendered.

With Soviet armies closing in, the situation was hopeless for the trapped German forces. The Sixth Army was surrounded by seven Soviet armies. With little choice left, on January 31, 1943, Paulus agreed to surrender. Twenty-two generals surrendered with him, and on February 2, the last 91,000 frozen starving men, all that was left of the Sixth and Fourth armies, surrendered to the Soviets.

German Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus, Major General Arthur Schmidt, and Paulus' adjutant Colonel Wilhelm Adam after their surrender, Stalingrad, January 31, 1943.

The carnage of the Battle of Stalingrad finally came to an end. Only months before, in the what must have felt like a life-time away, Hitler and the Germany Wehrmacht seemed to be poised for an epic victory over the Soviet Union. Six months and a million casualties later, the German defeat proved to be catastrophic.

The Soviets recovered more than 250,000 German corpses in the ruble of Stalingrad, and total Axis casualties including Germans, Romanians, Italians, Hungarians, and Croatians are believed to have been more than 800,000 dead, wounded, missing, or captured.

Of the 91,000 German soldiers who surrendered to the Soviet forces, only some 5,000 ever returned to their homeland, the last of them a full decade after the end of the war. The rest perished in Soviet prisons and labor camps.

On the Soviet side, official Russian military historians estimate that there were 1,100,000 Red Army dead, wounded, missing, or captured in the campaign to defend the city. An untold number of Russian civilians also died amidst the fighting as well.

Vasily Grigoryevich Zaytsev, pictured left here, was a Soviet sniper who killed 225 soldiers and officers of the Wehrmacht and other Axis forces with a standard-issue rifle during the Battle of Stalingrad. He lived long after World War II ended and died at the age of 75 in 1991.

A Red Army soldier waves a flag signaling the Soviet victory while standing on a balcony overlooking a square at the Battle of Stalingrad in February of 1943. The soldier has a rifle strapped to his back. It has become one of the most iconic photographs of the bloody battle which proved to be the epic turning point of the Second World War.

German prisoners wrapped in coats, blankets, or anything they could find to protect against the bitter winter weather, are marched through the snowy streets of battered Stalingrad after their defeat by Soviet forces in February 1943.

In 1945, Stalingrad was officially proclaimed a "Hero City of the Soviet Union" for its defense of the Motherland. In 1959, construction began of an enormous memorial complex, dedicated to "the Heroes of the Stalingrad Battle," on Mamayev Hill, a key high ground in the battle that dominates the city's landscape today. The memorial was finished in 1967. Its focal point is *The Motherland Calls*, a great 172-foot-high statue of a winged female figure holding a sword aloft. The tip of the sword reaches 280 feet into the air. In the Mamayev complex, is the tomb of General Vasily Chuikov, who went on to lead the Soviet drive to Berlin and who died a marshal of the Soviet Union almost 40 years after the Battle of Stalingrad.