

RED ARMY TANK COMMANDER

AT WAR IN A T-34
ON THE EASTERN FRONT



VASILY BRYUKHOV

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on the Eastern Front

Vasiliy Bryukhov

Sergey Anisimov (Russian text)

Vladimir Kroupnik (English translation)

Steve Williamson (English editor)



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Childhood

I was born on 9 January 1924 in the town of Osa, Perm Oblast, in Sovetskaya Street. The house which I lived during my childhood years still stands. I remember my sister leading me by the hand along a rut made by horse-drawn carts; we were coming up the steps to the house, and carpenters hadn't yet finished decorating the last room. Large wood shavings were everywhere – I used to kick them about and they rustled so quietly.

My father reckoned our family would be a large one and so he built a substantial house. Although it was only one storey, it was roomy, and there was a deep cellar for storing pickled foods and potatoes. The house was divided into a large living room, with a table and chairs, the small bedroom where Dad slept, the small entrance hall and the kitchen. There was a cooking stove in the kitchen which had a space on one side where the kids slept in a bunk. We had fun there and, most importantly, neither Mum nor Dad would stop us or scold us for being noisy.

We would spend all summer by the riverside. Our family was large, and there wasn't much to eat in the summer apart from potatoes, beetroot and carrots, but there were plenty of fish in the river. We could fill a bucket with fish using dragnets, and we would eat some then and take the rest home.

The town was covered in greenery. Each house had a front garden and there were many vegetable gardens too – 200–300 square metres each. The streets were paved with cobblestones in the centre of the town and unpaved elsewhere. The houses were mostly wooden; there were brick ones only in the centre, including several mansions which had been owned by rich merchants before the Revolution. Shops, markets, the jailhouse and recreation clubs were also made of brick.

There were three churches in the town. Two had been demolished – I remember that as the bells were thrown down on the ground and smashed into pieces we kids were screaming with excitement. One church, which was near a cemetery, remained intact. Surprisingly this one continued to operate during the war. It became especially popular after the war, when a deacon came to run it: a handsome man, nearly 30 years of age. He was a former airman – a captain. He had been shot down, and found himself behind enemy lines, where he barely survived. Following this ordeal, he acquired faith in God and promised himself that when the war was over he would join the Church. He was picked up by partisans and was discharged before the end of the war because of his injuries. People began to throng to the church – not just to take part in the service but to watch him and to listen to his sermons.

My father was not religious at all and had no interest in church life. However, my mother became more devout during the war: she prayed that her children would survive. There were three of us at the front: my brother, me and my sister. So our mum prayed every day, and when the war had ended and all of us had returned home, she said: 'I've been praying for you and you stayed alive.'

I replied: 'Mum, they've prayed for everyone but not all of the soldiers returned.' This failed to dissuade her, and she would say: 'I prayed harder than the others.'

The only link we had with the rest of the country was the Kama River. In the summertime life was in full swing: people travelled to Perm and other riverside cities. But in the winter all movement would cease and the town would appear to be asleep under snow. Winters began at the end of September, and continual frost from -20°C down to -45°C would last all wintertime, through until April. Even in May you could skate on puddles that had frozen overnight. We would ski until April; we used to make the skis ourselves and used leather belts as bindings. I was an excellent cross-country skier and even adults could not catch me! When I became a district champion I was given skis with

real bindings – after that I had no serious challengers.

~~My childhood coincided with the creation of the Soviet state. In 1918 all land owned by landlords and the Church was confiscated and divided between the peasants. The allotment of land was not an easy process: prudent men fought for better ground as they knew where there was better soil and tillage. On the other hand, various drunkards and layabouts didn't care what kind of land was given to them: they received their land but didn't work on it and simply rented it out, which was called *ispa*. People were desperate for work during the First World War and the Russian Civil War. Of course there were some who had turned to drink or crime but the majority of people returned to work. The same was to happen after the Great Patriotic War.~~

Private enterprise developed quickly in the 1920s. Large farmsteads, which were to be known later as *kulak*¹ farms, had grown up. Of course the owners were not *kulaks* but hard-working people. They usually had large families, with ten to fifteen children, and up to a dozen cows, four to six horses, as well as pigs; they would sell meat and grain. They had money and the means to build: their houses were the biggest and the best in the village. This was the way it had to be if you had so many children – you couldn't live cooped up together – although living conditions remained quite primitive.

Take our family, for example. Initially the roof of the house was made of boards, then my dad began to earn more and replaced the boards with sheet iron. At the same time there was basic, often handmade, furniture inside the house: a table, chairs, benches, and bare floors and no curtains at the windows – only well-off people could afford those. In the summer we slept wherever we could – in the hay barn or simply outside, under the stars. In winter the youngest slept on the plank bed – it was cooler than the stovetop. We – the eldest children – slept on the floor, having thrown some overcoats underneath and some as covers, using a felt boot as a pillow.

Our clothes were very simple. My mum's brother was a tailor and used to have his own workshop during the NEP² times. She would buy the cloth, and our relatives would then create the clothes for us. The material she bought was the cheapest possible but we were always neatly and impeccably dressed. Footwear was more difficult. In the wintertime we had two pairs of felt boots: one for out and about and the other for home. I was always lively and agile, and my clothes didn't last long. We played soccer with bare feet – we would often smash our toes. We didn't have a real ball and would sew a bladder and stuff it with rags. Such a ball wouldn't roll well: you more often hit the ground instead of the ball itself.

I remember one time my mum was going to buy me shoes for autumn at the beginning of September. I had already become a good soccer player by that time and was begging her to buy me football boots (we used to call them *bootsy*) instead of shoes. Mum was reluctant but couldn't refuse, so she took pity on me and bought the football boots, though she hastily said: 'Well, feel free to walk on spikes.' I was overwhelmed with joy! I walked to school in them through the autumn; I played soccer in them, feasting my eyes on them constantly. I was so proud of them and looked after them as the most precious thing in my life – even when the boots had become worn out and the spikes were deeply incised in the sole, I patiently kept wearing them.

We ate different food at different times of the year. Our main diet was vegetables. We had meat only in the autumn, when the cattle were slaughtered. Mum would go to the market, select the meat and then make dumplings at home. She would make a big batch, freeze them and feed us with them during festive days. This was the most delicious food we ate. To tell you the truth, the flour was dark rye flour, but the dumplings were still very tasty. Springtime was the most difficult: we were running out of potatoes – they were already losing their quality, even though the storage was organized pretty well – and the cabbage was wilting. In other words, there was pretty much nothing to eat.

Once the snow had melted, harvesting the other vegetation would begin – nettles were now a substitute for cabbage; soup would be made by mixing them with flour. During the summer food was

more diverse, although there was no fat in the diet. In fact in the summertime we lived on 'pasture forage', and Mum only baked bread. We caught fish, and when I turned 12 my uncle presented me with a 16-calibre gun to kill birds. We used chopped wire instead of small shot and saltpetre (from the heads of matchsticks) instead of gunpowder. Later I sold the gun and bought Cracowian sausage in a shop with the money – I remember I divided it into small pieces and we stretched this luxury out over several days. There was almost nothing else in our food stores beside sausage and some tinned food. Sometimes we drank raspberry or beetroot tea. Occasionally Mum would give a small bit of sugar to each of us, and we would drink tea while holding the sugar in our mouths. Sugar was a rarity for us and we never had any sweets at all.

The second wave of famine occurred in 1937 but it was not as bad. Back then two loaves of bread were the ration per family. Mum would cut them into twelve pieces and, as she gave them to us, she would say repeatedly: 'If you want – eat it, if you want – drink it, if you want – leave it for tomorrow'. Mum liked proverbs. I ate my portion straight away. We had to queue all night long, whether winter or summer, for the bread, and then receive a daily ration of 200–400 grams per person.

During those times the 'Soviet elite' began to appear. In our town they were the MTS (Machinery and Tractors Station) director, leather works director and meat works director. These people were better off because of their jobs. This was when bribery started to occur, from my point of view. We took 'quit-rent' from the children of these directors: they would have a piece of bread at home and eat half of it – then they would stuff the other half into their pocket and bring it to us. Of course, it was done under threat: 'If you don't give us your bread, you'll get bashed!'

In spite of the hunger I studied well without too much effort. I guess I could have become a high achiever, but I didn't want to, as those kind of guys were treated with contempt – they were alien to our more active way of life. A high achiever is always alone, whereas we were always a group running around together.

It was around that time, when I was a young lad, that I got a couple of tattoos, including one of a bear, on my leg. What can I say? We all had connections with the criminal world. I had sixty-six male and female cousins, and there were all kinds of people among them: decent people and mobsters, even underworld leaders. Gennadiy Bryukhov, a son of my dad's elder brother Nikolay, was my cousin. At an age of 23 he had amassed thirty-eight years of jail sentences, along with several escapes. Sometime in 1939 he was on the run and came to visit my dad. My dad was highly respected among our kin; he was quiet and even-tempered, always ready to help. All of us knew that my cousin had escaped from jail and was a wanted man. We slept with him in our hay barn; he told me stories about his life, and I was carried away by the romance of it all. I eagerly told him I would go with him, and he agreed. We were going to rob a bank! I couldn't sleep with the excitement, thinking about the moment 'they'll go for it'.

When I woke up he wasn't around. Only later did I find out that he had warned all the other mobsters: 'If you touch him, if you take him down anywhere – I will find you no matter what it takes. Take down whoever you want, but not him – there's lots of guys in this village – but don't touch him'. Apparently he had done so out of respect to my dad.

Life became much easier during the last two years before the war. Hunger was a thing of the past, and shops were now filled with goods. 'Work days' in the countryside were now repaid with plenty of food. Now we had a lot of leisure time; groups of children would gather in the streets, districts and various quarters of the town; there were soccer, basketball and volleyball teams. Everyone – young and old – played soccer. We established an acrobatic team in our school: Kolya Babin was the anchorman, with Volodya Dratchev below, and me on the top. We mostly worked out and built human pyramids, and the public liked our performances. I was fond of acrobatics: I jumped, somersaulted

walked on my hands, did head-stands wherever I could. Although there were three of us in the group, only I could do headstands, and everyone admired this.

Systematic training, coupled with natural fitness, good health and overall physical development enabled me to stand out among my peers. I was winning class, school and then town competitions. In 1940 I became town champion and district champion, and in 1941 I won the Oblast junior championship, having received the first-class medal for sports at the contest in Perm.

The slogan 'Be ready for work and defence' was a 'matter of honour, conscience and heroism' and it was called back then. We used to hang around in the town's military commissariat after training and watch as strong and sturdy blokes were drafted into the army. The service in the RKKA³ became a matter of honour! Those who were rejected used to be called 'defectives' – it was a tragedy for them and a disgrace for their families.

Men were greeted with great excitement when they were demobbed from the army; they came back with great amounts of experience, having been through years of physical and mental hardship. Back home they would build primitive sporting facilities and start physical activities. We trained with them, learning some of their skills, then we would carry on the training ourselves.

Starting from the age of 12, we had military classes. It was my favourite subject: I always had excellent marks in military craft and physical education. I didn't have too much trouble with mathematics and literature, but I wasn't that good with other subjects; sometimes I did homework, sometimes I didn't. Our military-craft teacher had been an army serviceman who had risen to the rank of lieutenant before being discharged and becoming a teacher. Of course, he didn't know that much and couldn't pass on much knowledge, but he was good at telling funny stories.

We had small-calibre rifles and a shooting gallery at school. During our upper-school years the teacher gradually passed the role of team leader to me: he gave me the keys, rifles and often let me run the training. We knew all the outlying areas, where there were no people – the shooting distance in the gallery was 25 metres at the most, but out in the field we could shoot as far as 400 metres. In the wintertime the teacher would leave the whole ski station in my hands: he would start classes and then sneak away. I would take the whole team and we went wherever we wanted; we trained ourselves and everyone could ski pretty well.

Later, when I found myself in a ski rifle battalion, I was made an instructor: they had assessed my skiing skills – tacking between the trees and jumping. We had 25–30-year-old novices who had never skied before, and we had to train them for real – there was only a month for this before they would be off to the front – but how much can you train someone in just one month?

I liked square drilling. I remember how, after having walked girls home, we would polish our skills on the way back: turn right, turn left, about turn. We were walking and commanding each other and we knew the regulations! Therefore, when I joined the armed forces, square drilling was my favourite time. Any time that we had to show off, they would say: 'Bryukhov, come out and show real class!' Physically and in terms of knowledge of military craft, I was ready to serve in the army. That was why, after I'd been drafted, I always felt relaxed, had no difficulties and became a part of army life and enjoyed it.

I remember the news of the Khalkhin Gol military conflict⁴ arriving – it was a successful military operation that was widely publicized. Then the Finnish War⁵ began: first death-notification letters and tears, and then the first wounded men started to appear in town. They told us about the hardships of the war and cursed the commanders. Rumours about a big war began; the real enemy – Germany – came into the picture. People spoke about it openly at the beginning of 1941, and from April or May onwards we knew that war was coming soon although we didn't know exactly when.

We were bellicose: when we graduated from school Kolya Babin, Volodya Dratchev and

immediately decided to join military schools – naval for me and aviation for the others. Both of them were to die at the fronts of the Great Patriotic War, but back then we enthusiastically sang: ‘Don’t touch us – we won’t touch you, but if you do – we’ll give you no quarter.’

In May 1941 two men from Osa – Bryukhanov and Alyoshin – who had recently graduated from a military school returned home on leave before departure for their assigned units. Smart and neat, in brand new uniforms strapped with belts, they looked splendid. We looked at them with admiration and envy. I pestered them with questions: ‘Tell me, how is life in the army?’

They replied, ‘Leave us alone. They’ll teach you the whole lot when you join the army.’

‘Will there be a war?’ they were asked time and again.

‘Yes, a war is coming soon – in the middle of June, we guess.’

But we knew anyway that a war would break out soon, as the mobilization had already begun in 1941, along with the deployment of military units. Many of our school teachers who had finished officer training courses were drafted. Many 34–35-year-old men were drafted. Newly-graduate teachers came straight from universities and colleges, while the more senior ones were leaving to join the army. Our school hours shrank abruptly.

Everyone understood that we were on the brink of war, but we still thought and hoped that with a bit of luck it wouldn’t happen. However, when war did break out, it happened suddenly and shook all of us. We had begun to enjoy a better life: there was more food, bread was plentiful and consumer goods had started to appear in the shops. But now here it was – the war!

The War

On 20 June 1941 school-leaving parties were held for the final-year students; the next day, Saturday, we packed up camping gear and food and headed to the bank of the Tulva to have some leisure time for a couple of days. Here we fished, picked strawberries, played football and lolled about on the grass, dreaming about the future. At night we couldn't sleep, and practical jokes ensued: someone would wake up with his face smeared with some dubious substance, to the sound of the other guffawing; or you might be given 'a hussar', where we would grab some wool, set it on fire and put it under the nose of sleeping man – he would jump up, then immediately be bowled over. There was also the so-called 'bicycle': we stuck paper strips between the toes of someone when they were asleep and set fire to them – he would 'pedal' in mid-air and jump up. More laughter!

We were on our way back, approaching the outskirts of town, when we heard a terrible crying and wailing. Quickening our pace, we saw children running towards us, imitating horsemen with sticks between their legs and twigs in hands, slashing the air to the left and right: 'The war! The war has begun!' Giggling and joking ceased – we ran back, having growled out 'goodbye' to each other. I dropped my backpack at home and dashed to the *voencomat*.⁶ When I arrived, more than a half of our class was already there, and the rest turned up within the next hour.

As always, my dad worked at the farrier's on Sundays, and my mum and a neighbour, Maria Kozlova, were at home, uneasily discussing the news about the break-out of war. Maria's son was doing his service on the western border – she was crying and, through her tears, telling us her misgivings about the fate of her son. It was discovered later that he had died as a hero during the very first days of the war, not having let his machine gun slip out of his grip. He was a courageous gunner, dashing and reckless.

My friends who had been born between 1921 and 1923 were summoned to the district *voencomat* during the first days of the war, given call-up papers and commandeered either to military schools or to draft companies of the combat troops. There were three of us who had been born in 1924, and we were not called up. People questioned our exasperation, saying, 'Where are you off to? You'll have your time there!' But the idea that the war wouldn't last long was firmly embedded in my head. The words of the song, 'Don't touch us – we won't touch you, but if you do – we'll give you no quarter' and a declaration by the People's Commissar Voroshilov that 'we will fight the war only on foreign soil, enough blood has been spilled on ours' had done the job. They had strengthened my faith in a quick victory, and I was afraid of being too late for action. My teenager's imagination drew a colourful picture of a battlefield, and I was eager to head to the front. Day after day I would go to the *voencomat* and ask to be drafted. The *voencomat* men were experienced people – they chuckled at my impatience, calming me down: 'You wait, your turn will come. You'll see a lot of action.' How right they would be!

In August the first wounded and evacuated men began to arrive in Osa from Odessa, then from Moscow and other westerly locations. Our school was converted into a hospital. Our troops, although putting up a fierce resistance to the enemy, kept retreating, leaving cities behind . . . the war dragged on. Day after day groups of young recruits, increasing in age, were leaving Osa. My father was summoned but then was allowed to stay. I kept kicking my heels every day on the threshold of the *voencomat*, but they wouldn't accept me on account of my age.

In September 1941 I finally got a phone call from the *voencomat*: my call-up papers had arrived

was summoned to the *raikom*⁷ and recommended to join a ski rifle battalion. I was upset: I had wanted to join a naval school, but didn't dare tell them that. It certainly wasn't customary to disagree back then – the war was on, and people went where they were most needed. Along with two others, I was commandeered to Kungur, where a ski rifle battalion was formed.

The field camp was still under construction, and for the first three months we were busy mostly with that – we set up a military township designed to accommodate a rifle brigade. We built half-dugouts for all personnel, a utility block, a dry mess, depots and training premises. Bunk beds were erected in the dugouts, we put mattresses stuffed with straw on them and set up stoves made of 20-litre drums. Initially we lived in four-man tents – there were twelve men in each. During October we had rain, followed by strong frosts, and it even snowed from time to time. We slept in our uniforms with boots and puttees on. We would press ourselves against each other and dry our clothes by the warmth of our bodies; this way we might get dry by morning.

Instead of the morning exercises our Ukrainian *starshina* (sergeantmajor), a horrible martinet, rushed us to a nearby forest to carry back logs sawn for construction purposes. As the area of cleared forest increased, we had to make longer and longer runs. After three weeks, when we were marched for 10 kilometres to a bathhouse in Kungur, our foot wraps were falling apart in our hands when we took them off. We had just warmed up, getting everything neat and clean, when we had to march back down the same 10-kilometre track of mud.

Breakfast was tea and a piece of bread in the morning, *maigre bortsch* (beetroot soup) and buckwheat porridge for lunch, and for dinner we would have herrings and a piece of bread, about 300 grams. We saw no meat – but then at home we'd had meat only in the autumn and winter. We got some extra food from the *kolkhoz* potato fields: we would approach a night watchman (people back then were tender-hearted and no one would kick us out), dig out the potatoes and bake them over charcoal.

The work was relentless and done in silence – such was the strain. When younger guys arrived as reinforcements, they would at first be eager to carry logs, always be the first with jokes, but then they would become quieter and quieter, and eventually they would stop talking. Even though I was a strong fellow, in the end I began to realize that I wouldn't last long this way. Many of us were falling ill and several were taken to a hospital, though I managed to endure this ordeal.

At long last the construction was completed. Combat and political drilling now began – the so-called 'young fighter course'. Several hours each day of square-bashing and tactical drill training. We were taught to shoot and studied firearms intensely – we had competitions to see how fast we could assemble and dismantle submachine guns and rifles. All drilling was run in the town and its outskirts, and only the two-hour political classes were held in warm dugouts. We liked those most of all – we could warm ourselves up and have a bit of a snooze.

In spite of the strenuous labour and the drilling, the half-starved existence and gloomy news from the fronts, there was no panic as such. There was only one thought: to get to the front line as quickly as possible, to be in action! That was why I took the drilling very seriously, and the results began to tell immediately – the commanders held me up as an example to other soldiers. The older guys joked over my enthusiasm, accusing me of trying to gain favours, to please the commanders, but I simply liked to learn the craft of a soldier and wanted to fight. I didn't think I would be killed; on the contrary, I thought I was invulnerable.

The winter came. It was an early one and quite cold. The cross-country ski training began, and it was in my element: I was good at three-step skiing style, double-poling and even ski-skating, although there was no proper ski path. Specially built ski-jumps, from which one could leap up to 5 metres, were no problem for me. My skiing skills were noticed, and soon I became a ski instructor, working with the battalion head of physical education. I showed people how to snake between trees and how

ski-jump. Many soldiers were almost 40 years old, and some of them were not good at skiing at all but they still had to jump – if a man couldn't make a jump, he had to climb up the hill and do it again – they had to master the technique and would often become exhausted before they managed it.

In November our battalion was sent to the Moscow outskirts. When we were on the road, silence was critical. The men were not battle-seasoned, and hence nervous. Everyone was worrying about the first action and the chances of surviving it. The suspense was depressing and we would distract ourselves from these thoughts by singing, as each of us knew lots of songs back then. The train ran without stopovers – we didn't even stop to have food and ate the dry rations provided for three days.

By the end of the second day we realized that we were approaching the front line – we saw smashed and burned-out carriages torn off the rails and ruined station buildings. Suddenly the train stopped. We heard the command: 'Get off and line up.' Just as we managed to jump out of the carriages, two Messerschmitts howled over our heads in contour flight, strafing the train with guns and machine guns. They turned around and made another run, having dropped a couple of bombs. One of them exploded not far away from me, and I felt pain in my leg and shoulder. Having done one more run, the planes flew away. *Kolkhozniks* from the nearby villages rushed up in their sleighs to help us. Wounded men, including me, were transported to a nearby railway junction, where an ambulance train was stationed. We were put in a carriage and transported back east. It turned out that I had been wounded by bomb splinters: a long thin piece of steel stuck out of my right knee joint; a second, smaller one was stuck in the soft tissues of my right shoulder. A surgeon came up to me and examined the wounds:

'Aha! Well, old chap, the splinter in your knee doesn't sit that deeply. We'll just . . . grab it . . . and pull it out!' Having said that, he abruptly jerked it out. I roared with pain.

'That's it. Now we will treat the wound, dress it. Take a walking stick, and in two weeks you will be running. As for the splinter in your shoulder, we will think it over. Um, old chap, you are shell-shocked as well – your nose is bleeding. Not a drama, the shock is mild.'

The splinter healed over and later only proved irritating during parallel-skiing exercises.

We were transported to Perm. I recuperated in a local hospital, enjoying being warm and well-fed. Soon a *voencomat* representative came to the hospital. Having summoned me, he asked:

'Are you fit?'

'Certainly!'

'I recommend you to study in a naval air-force technical school. Agreed?'

'Sure!'

I was so happy that I wanted to jump up and down. My dream to serve in the navy had come true – at last I would wear the marvellous naval uniform.

Training began. The cadets were lodged in quarters, with four men in each. We were still in army uniform, but soon we heard rumours that by the New Year we would have our new uniforms. I was outraged when the new uniform we were issued with was still the land army one. I was so upset that I went to complain to the commanding officers, right up to the level of the head of political department. The latter received me in his office and listened to me.

'What is it about this uniform for you? Wear the stuff you've got – you've been wearing it for months.'

'I don't want to! Send me to a flying school instead, then.'

'Why should I send you to a flying school? You are a soldier! You have to serve wherever you're ordered,' he said in a harsh voice.

I could understand it with my mind, but not with my heart. 'Then send me to any officer school – Infantry, artillery, tanks – no difference!'

'You've got to be kidding! Listen up – an aviation engineer is a person held high in everyone's

esteem. At the front you will be provided with flyer's rations in a ground service battalion, 70 to 100 kilometres away from the battle line.'

'Comrade captain second rank,⁸ I don't want to be far away from the front line. I want to fight. I want to be an officer.'

I tried to convince him, but my argument failed and I returned to my quarters quite subdued. My mates were laughing at me.

'What a fool you are. This is the best school. In three years you will get a profession which is needed both at the front and in civilian life. Don't be stupid!'

But I couldn't get over it. My studying deteriorated; I had no drive. Some time later I was summoned to the commander.

'What's wrong with your hearing?' he asked me straight away.

'It's all right, no complaints,' I replied, surprised.

'But the chief engineer reports that you can't make a sound reading of a change in the engine mode.'

'That's great!' I rejoiced. 'Comrade captain second rank, send me to an officers' school.'

'All right, as you are so adamant . . .'

The Tankman

I was instructed to go to the Oblast *voencomat*, and from there I was commandeered to the Stalingrad tank school. I was provided with dry rations for three days (half a brick of bread, a piece of sausage and a tin of stewed meat), clothes and food coupons, and – changing modes of transport many times – headed to Stalingrad. I arrived in June 1942, and met Kolya Babin and Volodya Dratchev at the school. There we were joined by Pyotr Akatiev, Nikolay Polovinkin and a chap called Brazhkin. Altogether there were eleven guys from our town of Osa in that school. All the others were to die in combat.

The Germans were already at the approaches to the city. During the school parade line-up, in the thick of the bombing raids, the head of the school Major-General Serkov announced a Supreme Command decision: ‘The school is to be evacuated to Kurgan, where a training and matériel base is to be established, without any interruption of the process of training, to prepare speedily the officers and personnel that are urgently needed at the front.’ The general – a smart, laconic and exacting but very fair man of medium build – enjoyed respect from all the cadets and teaching staff of the school. He had first encountered the enemy at the border and had been badly wounded, losing his arm in one of these early battles.

The school personnel departed, and a group of cadets, headed by Captain Guzhva – a mighty and youthful officer aged about 30 – stayed behind to pack up and send off the school matériel. We left the burning city in the middle of the night on a ferry that had been miraculously acquired for the school evacuation. We boarded a train on the opposite bank of the Volga and headed to Kurgan under the threat of enemy bombs. We arrived after five days’ travelling and unloaded our matériel not far away from the town, setting up a drilling square for the school on the same spot. We lived in a school building, sleeping in the classrooms. I remember the schoolmistress, a 40- or 45-year-old woman (who seemed to be very old to us back then), treated us as if she was our mother. She regaled us with slightly frozen sweetish potatoes which we baked in a school oven; we shared our dry rations with her. When we were leaving for Kurgan to do our training, she gave us a very touching farewell, wishing us success and to live through to the day of victory.

There was a church on the bank of the Tobol River that was fitted out as our dry mess. Several nearby buildings were arranged as barracks and classrooms. By the time I arrived, my company had been training for about a month and a half. I had to catch up with them, but it wasn’t that hard for me – my ten years of school helped me master the training programme. We studied twelve hours a day, eight hours of class work and four hours of homework, under the charge of the platoon commander Lieutenant Pashkevich. He was close to 40 – a medium-sized, strong, clever, sober-minded and cordial man. Better than anyone he knew how to ‘talk to us silently’ – and we would understand him. There was also our company *starshina* Toloshnyi – a pedantic and meticulous serviceman whom we feared greatly. One typical example of his behaviour is his treatment of a cadet in our group called Umanskiy. Once, shortly before New Year’s Eve, Umanskiy came down with a cold. He went to the sick bay, where he got a certificate that he was exempted from drilling in the open air. He put on his trench coat and came out of the barracks. Toloshnyi came up to him:

‘Umanskiy, why aren’t you in the line?’

‘Comrade *starshina*, I’ve been exempted.’

‘Where is the exemption notice?’

Umanskiy handed it over.

~~‘Exempted from drilling and work in the open air,’ Toloshnyi read out. ‘But “morning exercises not mentioned! Take your trench coat off and join the file!’~~

This was how life was for us. In the movies sometimes you may see cadets going AWOL, going to dancing parties in the evenings and chasing girls – what girls? Dancing? – we could barely lift our feet!

The food was simply miserable! Soup in the morning, millet gruel for lunch and soup again for dinner. What kind of soup was it? They would chuck some cereals into the water – nothing to eat, you could simply drink it. Nowadays jail rations must be better than those. We began to take turns to eat our dinners – today I have dinner, tomorrow you do. We would pour off some of the fluid from the soup mug and eat the remaining bit with a piece of bread. Bread was a 250-gram brick, hard as a cracker, and it could be called ‘bread’ only in name, for it was a mixture of very odd things.

We became badly emaciated. If we climbed a flight of stairs, we were exhausted. As I said before there were eleven guys from Osa, scattered across different companies; one of them was Kolya Babitskiy who had been in the acrobatic group with me in secondary school. But now, when I did a handstand, I saw stars and almost passed out. Some men complained, and a special commission from the Ural military district visited us. A general, accompanied by several officers, entered the classroom in which our company was. Having glanced over us, he fixed his stare on me: ‘So, you say the food is poor? Look at this chap – seeing him, one wouldn’t say that he’s underfed.’ I was very offended! The commission left, and nothing much changed in our lives.

All everyone talked about was food. One such chat was interrupted by Petrakovskiy – the elder brother of all of the cadets:

‘Guys, why do we only talk about food? Let me tell you the story about my marriage.’

Everyone yelled out, ‘Come on’, ‘Go for it!’, ‘Tell us!’

‘Well, then you listen up. I was a year-one student at a geology institute and got acquainted with a girl from the same year. She was gorgeous, slender with long blonde-brown hair. She was always dressed up and stood out from the rest of the students. Her parents were engineers – well-paid people. Many of the guys liked her, but for some reason she had chosen me. Can’t say why, but she accepted my very first invitation to go to the movies. I remember that the film *The Great Life* with Aleinikov and Andreyev⁹ was on. That’s how our courtship started. I did my best and got tickets for the film. We would go to the movies, to the opera house, we had a good time. Then I was introduced to her parents and we decided to get married. Her parents gave their consent.’

Everyone was listening to him very attentively, only rarely interrupting the story with ribald questions, but Petrakovskiy wouldn’t dignify the hecklers with any reply.

‘Our wedding was celebrated in a restaurant. There was live music. On the table there were . . .’ there followed a detailed description of the courses present on the tables and served by the waiters. Each of us felt as if we’d been there and breathed in the aromas of the food. We were so hungry, but Petrakovskiy, as if having forgotten about us, kept on describing the wedding table in great detail:

‘And then they brought out on large silver trays two suckling piglets, roasted with crisp crackling and surrounded with apples and greens . . .’

At this moment someone abruptly stood up. Petrakovskiy saw a cadet called Kvitchuk, his eyes wide and staring, and barked: ‘Comrade Kvitchuk, what would you have done with these piglets?’

Kvitchuk wildly bellowed out: ‘I’d have eaten it! I would have!’ He collapsed on the table, shivering, but he kept yelling: ‘I’d have eaten it! I would have!’ Then he fell silent. A medical nurse called to the spot, wafted smelling salts under his nose and gave him an injection. He calmed down, we carried him to the bunk, and he fell asleep. Everyone was scared. On the next day Kvitchuk was sent to the sick bay, where he stayed for about a week. We declared a boycott against Petrakovskiy and

stopped talking to him at all.

~~The cadets' allowance was forty roubles a month. It was issued on Sundays, and I would go straight to the market and spend it on a kilo of carrots, and ate them immediately. If I took them back to the barracks I would have to share them with the other guys. Of course, I could have written to my family, asking them to send me a food parcel, but I was aware that my family back home was large enough to support anyway, and they wouldn't be able to help. That was why, when I wrote to them, I told them that I was fed well and wasn't short of anything. Many of the guys couldn't endure it, however, and asked for food parcels. When they received one, they would eat it under their blanket so that they did not have to share it with anybody. This was not good, but how can you punish a starving man for his desire to feel full? In spite of the hunger there was no stealing from each other.~~

After the Stalingrad victory a directive arrived to form propaganda ski brigades and travel around the nearby villages and promote the work of the army. General Serkov charged Lieutenant Fedorov (the school's head of physical education) and the head of the political department to raise such a brigade. We received an announcement that a cross-country ski race between Kurgan and Sverdlovsk was being prepared. Its participants were to receive better food rations – this phrase had an amazing reaction. Everyone suddenly became a skier and an inveterate traveller: when selection commenced, a crowd of volunteers gathered before the office. When my turn came, I entered, looking pathetic: 163 cm tall, jackboots four sizes too big and a hat two sizes too large – intentionally worn to hide my ears, which had been frostbitten during ski competitions. The lieutenant glanced at me pityingly:

‘Listen, sonny, you are just a kid! What kind of skier are you?’

‘I was a district champion. I have top grades in skiing,’ I said imploringly.

‘What kind of champion are you?’

‘I have a certificate.’ I showed my skier's card, issued to competition participants.

‘Well, that may be,’ the lieutenant said, sceptically examining the paper, apparently unconvinced. ‘Come around tomorrow. We'll see what sort of skier you are.’

Thus I found myself among twenty candidates, of which ten would be picked. The lieutenant started the selection without further ado. His girlfriend lived about 10 kilometres from the school, hence the route was laid via her house. We set off; the group stretched out along the road immediately, but I stuck right behind him. I was running out of strength, but kept thinking: ‘I may fall over but I won't give up and will hold my own.’ The lieutenant and I approached the house together – only then did he realize that there was no one but me with him. He walked me into his girlfriend's hut, ‘You stay here for a while, and I will go to pick up the rest. If I don't return, go back.’ His girlfriend gave me food, and I fell into a slumber straight away.

I slept for about three hours, woke up and asked, ‘Has the lieutenant come back?’

‘No, he hasn't.’

‘If he hasn't been here for three hours, it means something has happened.’ I hobbled back to the school, battling muscle pain. The other guys were picked up from the nearby villages throughout the night; luckily the *kolkhoz* helped and provided a horse and a sleigh. It was morning by the time all of them had been transported back to the school, though only a few of them could move by themselves as their legs hurt so much.

The incident was reported to the head of the school. He summoned the PE leader and reprimanded him. The guy tried to justify himself, but there was no excuse. The brigade was supposed to take off in five days, and many of its members were now in bed, unable to stand upright. Of course he was in the wrong: he shouldn't have sent poorly trained and emaciated training cadets on that trial run.

Having vented his anger at him, General Serkov asked, ‘What shall we do now?’

Everyone was silent.

‘Comrade general,’ I said, standing up. ‘Last year I took part in ski trips between Osa and Kungur, and Perm and Osa. Both were just over 100 kilometres. I know the intricacies of preparation for such trips. Although we have only five days to get ready, and yesterday’s run exhausted the cadets, I can prepare a team which will handle the propaganda trip.’ I then expounded a detailed plan of the preparation procedures.

‘I will lead the column and adjust the pace accordingly. If everyone is running steadily, I will speed up; if they become too spread out, I will slow the pace down. Lieutenant Fedorov will be following the column and pushing it forward. Apart from that, comrade general, I request that we be provided with a horse and sleigh from the auxiliary service, in which the *zampolit*¹⁰ and a medic will be seated. We will also load our backpacks with food rations into it. The horse will return from Chashi with the medic, and we will find some transport for the *zampolit*. I also request that all the trip participants be fed properly.’

‘Well, Bryukhov,’ the general stood up, ‘you’ve drawn a full picture for us. I guess we have no choice but to accept your proposal. I entrust the trip preparation and implementation to Lieutenant Fedorov, you and Politruk¹¹ Vorov.’

We broke up satisfied – even the PE leader was happier. General Serkov called me over, ‘Good lad, you will become a strategist and a sensible officer.’ I blushed and didn’t know what to say in reply.

After five days of training, the propaganda brigade headed out of the school gates under an overcast sky. General Serkov saw us off, with the brass band playing in the background. We marched most of the planned 40 kilometres over the first day, and were close to our destination – the district centre of Chashi. The *zampolit* rode ahead in the sleigh to organize a welcome for us, and I was tasked with leading the rest into town. We were on the approach to Chashi, and we could already see lights from the windows of the houses when the guys ran out of strength. Everyone stopped, unable to move any further. I said, ‘Untie your backpacks, let’s have some food and we’ll find the strength for the last spurt. There’s no more than a kilometre left, maybe two.’ In fact there were about 5 kilometres to go but each of us had a sandwich and cheered up. We arrived two hours late, but people were still waiting for us, and there was another brass band. The secretary of the local Komsomol youth organization gave a speech and congratulated us. Then our *zampolit* spoke in response, although all we wanted to do was go to sleep.

As mentioned before, the training was very intense. A great deal of time was given to the theoretical aspects – the technical features of BT-5 and T-34 tanks as well as tank tactics. There was only one practical session: I fired three shells and one machine-gun magazine. We also had a little bit of practice driving a BT-5 tank, covering the fundamentals: how to start off and how to drive in a straight line. There were also tactical studies, though mostly on foot, pretending to be tanks! Only at the end was there a showcase training session – a ‘tank platoon in attack’. That was all!

After the war I examined a German training complex in Austria. It was definitely much better. For example, we had immobile targets for gun shooting and moving ones for machine-gun shooting. This entailed a telephone line to a trench, where a soldier would receive orders to raise or lower the target. It was prearranged that a target was to emerge for five or six seconds, although the actual time it was visible depended on the operator involved. The Germans, however, had a system of blocks on their training ground. It was operated by one large wheel running both gun and machine-gun targets. The wheel was spun by hand, and the duration of time that the target was in sight depended on the speed of the rotation. The German tank crews were better trained than us, and it was dangerous to encounter them in combat.

At our graduation the head of the school said, ‘Well, lads, we are aware that you’ve run through the programme quickly. You have limited knowledge, but you will complete your training in action. The most memorable lesson, which had an impact on all my subsequent service, was given to me by Major Drozdov, who was our trainer in tactics. He was an ex-officer of the Tzarist army called up from reserve, and he was about 60. He used to say the following: ‘Lads, remember the sacred rule. It was considered the main one by Suvorov!’¹² The most important rule is that you have to take care of your soldier before and during combat: he needs to be fed, clad and shod, and needs a rest. If you do this, you will succeed in battle. If you don’t, there will be no success. If he is hungry and cold, then, when you lead him into an attack, he won’t be cheering – he will be barely crawling. You may call up a lecturer from Moscow, from the Central Committee [of the Communist Party], who will be able to deliver him a lecture on how to defend the Motherland, and you will try to rouse him into an attack, but he won’t be cheering. But if an illiterate cook comes around, maybe with two or three years of primary-school education, but with a ladle of good *bortsch* and gruel, you can rouse him into an attack, and he will follow you, cheering, and he will do the job.’ This was the only thing I remembered out of the whole course, but I always followed this rule. I always took care not only of my crewmembers but also of the crews from the platoon. And the soldiers responded in kind.

In February 1943 an order came to select twenty-eight of the best cadets, give them two months of accelerated training and turn them out. I had joined the school a month and a half later than the rest, but was turned out a month and a half earlier: hence I only studied for three months. One of the selected men failed, even though he was an engineer with a degree. We thought at the time, ‘How unlucky this man is!’ How naive we were! He was 33 or 34 years old, a family man with two children, and he had no desire whatsoever to go into combat.

Straight after the graduation I received a summons to General Serkov’s office. I started to worry, but Captain Guzhva calmed me down: ‘Go, the general is asking for you as he’s got a sensible suggestion for you. Accept it.’ I couldn’t imagine what kind of suggestion it was going to be, and I entered the general’s office meekly, holding my breath. He came out from behind the desk to greet me, seated me on a chair, sat himself in front of me and began to tell me about the situation at the front. He said that the backbone of the German war machine had been broken, and that victory would be ours. Well, I had had no doubts about it myself.

‘Listen, Bryukhov,’ he continued, ‘you are still a greenhorn, what kind of a commander would you be? Stay here in the school to drill the cadets. Your platoon and company commanders praise you. You’re a good athlete. Stay here!’

I was gobsmacked.

‘Comrade general, I want to be at the front line; I want to fight. You see, the war will end soon, and I won’t have my time in it. How can I then look people in the eye?’ I felt a lump in my throat, and tears appeared in my eyes.

‘Sonny, there is no “soon” yet. The war will last for more than a year from now – you’ll have your share of it for sure.’

‘No, I want it now.’

The general looked thoughtful, staying silent for some time, and then spoke: ‘Who’s going to do the drilling? I want to go to the front line as well.’

‘You’ve seen combat, you’ve lost your arm, but I’ve done nothing so far. I implore you, send me off. There are two sergeants in our section – Kochnev and Lobanov – who were at the front line in the early days of the war and came here after injuries. Leave them here,’ I begged.

Seeing me look so crushed, he took pity. I rejoiced enormously, beaming with delight, and barked in my immature commanding voice, ‘Yes, sir! Permission to go?’

‘Why are you in so much of a hurry, lieutenant?’ asked General Serkov, then looked at me once again, shook his head and said, ‘Dismissed!’

I saluted, replied with an emphatic ‘Yes, sir!’, neatly turned about and left the office. It happened that the aforementioned sergeants were at the parade ground. I ran all 12 kilometres of the way there without stopping, to tell them: ‘You are urgently summoned by the school head!’ We hitched a ride back to the school in a passing vehicle; the general summoned Kochnev and he agreed without hesitation (he didn’t call up Lobanov at all).

With two pips on my collar, I headed off to Chelyabinsk to the 7th Reserve Training Tank Regiment. The officers’ boarding house was situated in the school hall, which held about thirty beds. Food was provided based on a coupon system; those who didn’t want the meals could get dry rations at a supply depot. We were left to our own devices most of the time, apart from short study periods. The older guys tended to spend their free time with women. Lieutenant Vasya Estafiev was usually the instigator of this. He was a man of medium height, with broad shoulders; he had been born in 1920, a tractor driver who had been conscripted into the army before the war and had completed an accelerated course in a tank school.

I remember lying on my bed, frustrated: they’d told me in the personnel department that my recruitment for the Special Urals Volunteer Tank Corps had finished, which was why my application to join the Perm Brigade had been rejected, and I had wanted so much to fight side by side with my fellow townsmen. At that moment, someone entered the room. Dressed in a smart lieutenant’s uniform, he was roughly the same size as me, with curly light brown hair, a forelock stuck out under from his cocked field-cap. I noticed the expression in his eyes and his smile at once. I sat up and he came over and stretched out his hand:

‘Nikolay Maximov.’

‘Vasiliy Bryukhov,’ I stood up.

‘Where is everyone?’ Nikolay asked, looking over the empty, unmade beds.

‘They’ve gone out somewhere. Chelyabinsk is a large place, there’s a lot of space for the walkabouts,’ I replied.

‘And why are you languishing here?’ he asked with interest.

‘Well, don’t feel like doing that. I’d rather read books – there’s an excellent library here. I am sick of idling in this place. I wanted to fight together with my townsmen, but it didn’t happen that way. You see, the war may end soon, while we just sit around.’

‘You’re a crank,’ Kolya laughed. ‘The war is at its height. Don’t worry, there will be enough action for us. I’ve heard in headquarters that it’s going to be hot near Kursk. That is where we need to get to.’

Next day, during studies, the regimental Chief-of-Staff came to the classroom, together with a representative of the Kirov tank works. We stood up. The Chief-of-Staff allowed everyone to sit down and then asked the representative to speak. The man, having taken off his peak cap, began to speak in a quiet voice: ‘Comrade officers, you are aware of the situation at the front and in the rear. We have to be smashing and driving the Fascists out of our land as fast as possible, but we need weapons to do so. Our plant does its best to give you more tanks, but we are short of people. We need extra hands for at least a month or even just a week. We decided to ask you for help.’

For a minute there was silence. I was thinking about what I could do at the works – I had no special skills at all. Then Vasya Estafiev took the floor: ‘Nooo! It’s not for us! Any day now we will get our tanks and leave for the front. Let us have fun for a few days. Maybe these are the last days of our lives!’ He forced a smile, looking round and seeking support.

Kolya Maximov raised his head. Standing up and turning to face us, he said firmly, ‘Brothers, don’t listen to this loudmouth. When the plant asks, we have to help. I used to be a metalworker before

the army and I'm going to work again.' Turning to the plant's representative, he announced, 'Add me to the list.'

I and some of the other guys followed him, though others didn't succumb to his persuasions. The representative warned us that our labour would only be paid with free lunch coupons. There were no objections from our side.

We started work the next morning. Nikolay and I were assigned to drilling apertures in engine cylinder blocks. Nikolay had completed a training course and was a qualified fourth-grade metalworker. Our semiautomatic machine tools stood next to each other, and he quickly helped me to master the simple operation. It didn't take a lot of effort – several days later I was already fulfilling my quota and was even ahead of schedule. We were pretty well fed at the plant: for lunch there was always a starter, soup or *bortsch*, and good gruel with a fair amount of meat. On top of that we also had our officer's rations.

We became good friends through working together. I liked Nikolay as he had grown up in Moscow and I liked his 'city bloke' charm. I accentuated my rural way of speaking, and he spoke beautifully, with a Moscow accent. I tried to imitate his manners, which he appreciated. Muscovites were different from us country chaps, with their mental outlook, way of thinking, knowledge and intellectual development; they were freer in their communication with other people. We spent all our leisure time together. He told me that he used to live in the Arbat area (in the very centre of Moscow) and his mother and sister – to whom he often wrote letters – were still there. Nikolay had learned to ride in a manège when he was a little boy, and was fond of horses.

Our work at the plant didn't last for long – we received our orders and reported to a reserve tank regiment, where we were issued with brand new tanks, still smelling of fresh paint. I took command of a tank platoon, with Kolya in charge of one of the tanks in the platoon. The third tank was under the charge of Lieutenant Bykov. I familiarized myself with the crews. My driver-mechanic, surname Romanov, was born in 1904 and used to be a tractor driver. Gunloader Leonenko was born in 1918, and a radiooperator – a young chap like me, born in 1924, a country boy. I don't remember his surname, but I do remember that we laughed when he told us a story about his pre-war marriage. He had had no parents and lived with his grandmother. Their neighbour had a daughter several years older than him. His granny kept urging him: 'You marry her, she's rich, she will feed you, and you will help them and work.' She convinced him, and the neighbours didn't mind – they needed a worker for the homestead. This is what he told us about the wedding:

'I'm sitting next to the bride, the guys run about outside, but they kept me indoors. I'm longing to get out, but she catches hold of me and doesn't let me go. Then they pour me a glass of wine, I drink it and get tipsy. She drags me into bed, fumbles around a bit but nothing happens. She woke up in the morning, but I had run away with the other guys. I played games with them, but they snatched me away again. This way she would hassle me for a while, then spit on it and leave me alone.'

Such were the guys in my crew. I believe that I was a good commander: during my childhood I used to be a good leader among my friends, and now I found common ground with my subordinates very quickly. Kolya Maximov recognized my leadership: although we were friends, discipline was observed, and I wouldn't allow any familiarities, even from him.

After platoon and company training, we set off on the 50-kilometre march to catch a train to the front. Unlike on the train in which I had travelled two years earlier, the atmosphere was very high-spirited and confident. After the victory near Moscow and then near Stalingrad people had regained their faith that we would be able not just to hold out against the enemy, but to defeat them.

They rode us along the 'green street',¹³ with practically no stopovers. In Kuibyshev the train stopped in the station itself, where the stationmaster warned us that the train would only stop for about

thirty minutes. Lunch had not been dispatched to the train, however, and so the train command ordered us to line up and head to a nearby dry mess. The tables had not been set, and there were only cauldrons with gruel and *bortsch* and sliced bread. I ordered the men to chuck gruel into their mess tins, take the bread and run back to the train. We rushed back, swallowing boiled pearl barley on the run, but arrived on the platform to find that there was no train. I ran up to the station-master and found out that the train had gone to Syzran. While I was searching for a way to meet up with our train again, an empty one arrived at the station. The station-master helped us board two of the heated carriages and we headed off to catch up with our tanks.

After the eventful lunch we fell asleep to the drumming of the wheels, worn out by the heat of the June day. I awoke to silence. Sliding the door open, I saw that the train stood in a railway yard in front of a bridge across the Volga. I hailed a passing workman and asked how we could get to the other side. He said that a passenger train, standing on a parallel track, was about to move across. I shook the guys out of their slumber, explained the situation, and we tried to sneak across the tracks and into the carriages of the passenger train, but no conductor would open a door for us. The train started off, with us hanging on the steps; although it was June, a cold wind struck us, and we were on the verge of falling off – but we caught up with our train! Our comrades welcomed us with open arms. During the roll call three men were found to be missing, so the station-master was informed about the route we were going to take, and we were on the road again.

After Malyi Yaroslavets there was an air-raid, but no bombs hit the train. The train turned south. Later we stopped in a railway yard, and an order to disembark and unload was given. There were no unloading platforms. The drivers began to unload the tanks, crumpling the flat wagons, and we were practically jumping down to the ground. Two tanks rolled upside down, but were quickly set on the tracks again. A representative of the 2nd Tank Corps was waiting for us and the battalion marched to the deployment area, where it joined the corps' 99th Brigade.

At the Front Line

Just days after our arrival the Battle of Kursk broke out. The corps was in the rear echelon. Our first action was defensive and not much of it has stayed in my memory, having merged with the six days of combat that followed. Somewhere we were fencing the enemy off, retreating, and then we would counter-attack together with the infantry. Nowadays some people are so good at telling stories – I am amazed that they remember the names of settlements near where they fought. How could I recall the names of all those places? You receive an order: ‘Move between landmark X and landmark Y’ – and off you go. You are on the move, you look for targets, you shoot, you spin around. A T-34-76 commander works like a circus artist – he lays the gun, he shoots, he gives orders to his gunloader and driver, he gets in touch with the other tanks from the platoon via radio. This requires his full concentration, otherwise in combat he is done for. Once there’s a target in sight, press your boot against the driver’s head – ‘A short one!’ – then one shot, then another. As your gun is thrown from left to right, you yell: ‘An armour piercer! A splinter one!’ There’s no air to breathe inside the turret as it’s full of gun smoke. The engine roars – you can’t hear shell bursts, and when you begin to fire yourself, you can’t hear anything that’s happening outside. Only when a solid projectile hits your tank or a shell bursts against your armour do you recall that they are shooting at you as well.

I took part in the Battle of Prokhorovka on 12 July. By 5.00 a.m. we reported our readiness to advance. Our task was to support the introduction of the 18th Tank Corps of the 5th Guards Tank Army into the battle and to reach Yakovlevo by the middle of the day. Having forestalled us, at about 5.30 a.m. the enemy air force and artillery launched an immense strike on our 5th Army, and the German advance commenced. The troops of the army began to retreat; we had to form company and platoon columns out of the battalion ones. Our battalion was deployed with the Psel River on its right flank and the 170th Tank Brigade of the 18th Tank Corps was deployed to the left of us. Having advanced, we became stuck against a deep ravine which blocked any further forward movement. Our corps and battalion tanks began to move left towards a railway; columns from our brigade and the 170th got mixed up. The spacing between tanks, which initially was about 150 metres, shrank to less than 20 metres. This uncontrolled mass of tanks then smashed into the enemy.

My participation in this action lasted for no longer than an hour. Having turned left to bypass the ravine, we found a place where we could descend into it instead; we moved along the bottom and then climbed out onto the opposite bank. Having reached the crest on the other side, I was astonished by the panorama opening up in front of me: crops were on fire, a little further away I saw burning villages and the battle was already taking its toll – tanks and vehicles were ablaze too. Clouds of smoke hung low over the field.

Suddenly I saw a light German T-III tank emerge out of a similar ravine about 200 metres from me. At first I was taken aback by the suddenness of its appearance – I had not expected to see the enemy at such close quarters. But I braced myself quickly, let it get into open space and then successfully destroyed it with the first shell. Several minutes later, a shell flew over, hitting us on the left side, and tore out an idler and the first roller. The tank stopped, having turned slightly. We leapt out and crawled into a shell crater and began to withdraw using small gullies for cover. Bykov’s and Maximov’s tanks had advanced a bit further, having also climbed out of the ravine. I only learned of their fate that evening when I reached the army rendezvous station for damaged machines, where my tank had been transported. I came across Kolya there: he told me that his tank had been damaged

straight after mine, though the crew had managed to leap out of it. Bykov wasn't that fortunate: his tank had burnt out – along with the whole crew.

That day we suffered huge losses. Because of this, there were a great many 'horseless' tankmen as there were not enough machines, hence we didn't take any further part in the action near Prokhorovka. However, we were not allowed to hang around in the rear for too long. An order came to reshuffle crews and they were transferred over to the 1st Tank Corps under command of General Butkov,¹⁴ which had been shifted to the Bryansk front and charged with capturing the city of Orel. Kolya and I convinced our commanders not to split us up and we were sent together to the 1st Battalion of the 159th Brigade of this corps.

During these first battles at the Kursk Salient it still seemed to me that the success of the whole operation depended on my participation. Whilst I knew that I couldn't defeat the Germans single-handedly, I was convinced that I was key to achieving success. There was a surreal sensation that this was some kind of a game! It was only at the Central Front, after I'd experienced a reconnaissance in force, that I stopped 'playing war games' and began to realize it was hard and dangerous work.

I can't remember now the name of the village for which we fought in September 1943. I do remember that we undertook several attacks in one day and suffered losses, but failed to break through the German defences. In the evening the brigade commander arrived. The remains of the brigade, numbering no more than twelve machines, were lined up in the forest. The commander briefly summarized the results of the unsuccessful action and said that we were unlikely to be able to carry out the planned task, and that the Motherland and the [Communist] Party were expecting something extraordinary from us. In conclusion he addressed the whole brigade:

'A reconnaissance in force by a strengthened platoon is required. I realize that it is a most difficult task, hence I ask volunteers to take one step forward.'

I stood forward with no hesitation. At that point – for the first and the only time in my life – I sensed the glare of my crew on my back, full of hatred. Everything shrank inside me, but there was no way back. The *combrig*¹⁵ came up to me and put his hand on my shoulder: 'Thank you, lad. Take a seat in the car and let's go to the spot to discuss the way you're going to attack.'

We rode through the forest up to a grove on a hillock where there was a control-observation centre for a rifle regiment. Our infantry took up positions slightly below in shallow trenches, and the enemy defence line could be seen a kilometre away, on the outskirts of a settlement.

Preparations didn't take too long. The commanders showed me the direction of movement and set up the objective – to drive a wedge into the enemy defence at maximum speed and force the enemy to reveal its fire-emplacement system. We were not to spare the ammunition. During the night the tanks of the brigade were refuelled, ammo was replenished, and by morning they were ready on the starting line. Tanks from my platoon were deployed over a front sector that was 1.5 kilo metres long. Kolya's tank was on my left; I don't remember the name of the guy in the tank on the right.

It is hard to describe one's feelings before an attack. There was no fear, which might have suppressed my fervour, but of course I was aware that I might die – that thought kept running through my mind.

A red flare put an end to my anxiety. Having yelled 'Forward' to my driver, I moved closer to the dashboard. We passed the thin line of infantry which were supposed to rise behind us and keep up with the tanks, and at that moment our artillery opened fire and struck the German positions. There was no return fire yet.

It was when the tanks approached the passes through the minefields that had been cut by the sappers that the Germans opened fire. The infantrymen dropped to the ground. Tanks immediately on my left and right began to lag behind, then the right one caught fire. I dashed ahead of the rest, and of course the enemy fire concentrated on me. Suddenly we were hit – there were sparks and flames, and

unexpectedly it became light. I thought that the gunloader's hatch had been opened, and yelled: 'Akulshin, shut the hatch!'

'There isn't one – it's gone!'

A shell had hit the hinge and torn it off! We were still about 200 metres from the enemy line when a German shell hit the front armour. The machine stopped, but didn't catch fire. (After the battle I saw that a solid penetrator shell had been fired at point-blank range, piercing the armour near the machine-gunner/radio-operator – the shrapnel killing him in the process – and going under the driver's hatch, tearing it off.) I was deafened by the blast and fell onto the shell stack, just as a second shell smashed through the turret and killed the gunloader. I was lucky to have fallen over in the blast; otherwise we all would have died.

Apparently I was not on the ground for too long. Having come to my senses, I saw the driver lying in front of the tank with his head smashed. I never understood whether he had tried to get out and was killed by a mortar shell, or had been mortally wounded inside the tank and managed to crawl out with his remaining strength. The dead machine-gunner/radio-operator sat in his chair. I climbed up on my seat and surveyed the locality using the panoramic viewer; two other tanks from our platoon were burning nearby. The Germans were not shooting any more, apparently having concluded that the tanks had all been destroyed. I took the driver's place, started the engine with compressed air, switched the rear gear and took off. The Germans opened fire and several solid projectiles hit the front armour. I stopped moving, deciding to wait until the brigade started attacking again. Soon our artillery began to shell the disclosed fire emplacements, then tanks and infantry began to advance and dislodged the enemy from their positions.

When all became quiet, and I climbed out of the tank, Kolya and gunloader Leonenko from another tank came over – only three of us from the whole platoon were still alive. Leonenko began to curse me: 'That's it, lieutenant, I ain't bloody gonna fight together with you again! You just got people killed! Screw you and your tanks! I ask you to do one thing: tell them that I'm missing in action.'

'Stop fooling around!' I objected. 'How many tanks did we lose for nothing yesterday? But today we've hit Fritz hard!'

'No, I don't want to burn in these boxes no more. I have a driving licence – I'm gonna move to another unit to be a driver.'

'All right, go wherever you want.'

When they began to sort out who had died, and didn't find Leonenko's body, a SMERSH representative asked me if I had seen him. As we had agreed, I told him that I hadn't and that most likely the guy was missing in action. It was after this battle that I began to fight a real war.

I spent just over a week in the brigade medical platoon as I'd been quite badly shell-shocked, then I was transferred to the battalion reserve. I hadn't had enough rest, however, when I was appointed as a replacement platoon commander; Kolya was posted to a different platoon.

How many battles were there altogether? I can't recall. There were successful and unsuccessful ones. You fought a battle, then you stopped, you put your machines in order, replenished fuel and ammo, ate and slept. Then in the morning – off you went again. If your machine had been destroyed you went off to the battalion reserve, where you got a new tank with a different crew. This was the 'circle of war', until you found yourself in the medical battalion or burnt out.

Once I was almost literally burnt out. Somewhere between Orel and Bryansk my tank was hit and caught fire. I yelled: 'Abandon the machine!' and grabbed the edges of the hatch chute to pull myself up and out – but the interphone plug was tightly stuck into the socket, and when I moved upwards, it jerked me back into the seat. My gunloader leapt out of my hatch, then I managed to escape and follow him. The helmet saved me – it didn't burn well, which was why I got scorches only on my face.

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