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Robert Forczyk

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The fighting around the town of Demyansk was one of the longest encirclement battles on the Eastern Front during the Second World War, stretching from February 1942 to February 1943. Originally, the German 16. Armee occupied Demyansk in the fall of 1941 because it was key terrain - a crossroads located on high ground amidst a sea of swampy terrain - that would be used as a springboard for an eventual offensive into the Valdai Hills. Instead, the Soviet winter counteroffensive in February 1942 encircled the German II Armeekorps and other units, totalling about 100,000 troops, inside the Demyansk Pocket. Another pocket was also created around Kholm, with another 5,000 Germans inside. Yet despite severe pounding from five Soviet armies, the embattled German troops held the pocket and the Luftwaffe organized a major aerial resupply effort to sustain the defenders. For the first time in military history, an army was supplied entirely by air.

After stopping the Soviet winter counteroffensive, the German 16. Armee mounted two major relief efforts to rescue their trapped forces in the Demyansk and Kholm pockets, which were finally relieved in April-May 1942. During the siege, the crack 3. SS-Division 'Totenkopf' was virtually destroyed, suffering 80 per cent casualties. However, Hitler demanded that the 12 divisions of II Armeekorps remain in the narrow Demyansk salient, whose base was only 6km wide. Throughout the summer and autumn of 1942, the Soviets pounded the salient from all sides, inflicting heavy casualties on the defenders. In February 1943, Marshal Timoshenko was ordered to launch an offensive to cut off the base of the salient and annihilate the 12 divisions. At the same time, Hitler finally came to his senses after the Stalingrad debacle and authorized the 16. Armee to withdraw from the pocket. Thus, the Germans began to withdraw just as Timoshenko opened his grand offensive to cut them off and destroy almost 100,000 German troops. This volume will conclude with the drama of a German army-size withdrawal under fire in winter, under attack from three sides.

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