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The Last Panther - Slaughter of the Reich - The Halbe Kessel 1945

Wolfgang Faust

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While the Battle of Berlin in 1945 is widely known, the horrific story of the Halbe Kessel remains largely untold. In April 1945, victorious Soviet forces encircled 80,000 men of the German 9th Army in the Halbe area, South of Berlin, together with many thousands of German women and children. The German troops, desperate to avoid Soviet capture, battled furiously to break out towards the West, where they could surrender to the comparative safety of the Americans. For the German civilians trapped in the Kessel, the quest to escape took on frantic dimensions, as the terror of Red Army brutality spread. The small town of Halbe became the eye of the hurricane for the breakout, as King Tigers of the SS Panzer Corps led the spearhead to the West, supported by Panthers of the battle-hardened 21st Panzer Division. Panzer by panzer, unit by unit, the breakout forces were cut down – until only a handful of Panthers, other armour, battered infantry units and columns of shattered refugees made a final escape through the rings of fire to the American lines. This first-hand account by the commander of one of those Panther tanks relates with devastating clarity the conditions inside the Kessel, the ferocity of the breakout attempt through Halbe, and the subsequent running battles between overwhelming Soviet forces and the exhausted Reich troops, who were using their last reserves of fuel, ammunition, strength and hope. Eloquent German-perspective accounts of World War 2 are surprisingly rare, and the recent reissue of Wolfgang Faust's 1948 memoir 'Tiger Tracks' has fascinated readers around the world with its insight into the Eastern Front. In 'The Last Panther,' Faust used his unique knowledge of tank warfare to describe the final collapse of the Third Reich and the murderous combat between the German and Russian armies. He gives us a shocking testament to the cataclysmic final hours of the Reich, and the horrors of this last eruption of violence among the idyllic forests and meadows of Germany.

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