



Men, Doctrine, Weapons

Manchuria in the Middle

From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Imperial Japanese Army regarded Czarist Russia and later the Soviet Union as its primary potential opponent. Japanese successes in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) temporarily removed the Russian threat and placed IJA units on permanent garrison duty in Manchuria, the main battleground of that war. Following the creation in 1905 of a governor-general's office (directed by an IJA general) to oversee Japanese interests along the South Manchurian Railroad, troops from two IJA divisions remained in Manchuria to protect Japanese lives and property. These units were eventually rotated back to Japan, and by 1910 six battalions composed of reservists formed the independent garrison unit and thereafter assumed responsibility for the defense of Japanese interests in Manchuria. IJA regulars replaced the reservists in 1916, and in 1919 Army Order Number Twelve established Headquarters Kwantung Army to control IJA garrison units in Manchuria. The Japanese contingent mustered about 10,000 troops.

Kwantung Army headquarters staff officers regarded themselves as the guardians of Japan's frontiers, in Manchuria's case a frontier for which over 160,000 Japanese casualties in the

Russo-Japanese War had paid in blood. They came to believe that the War Ministry and General Staff officers in Tokyo did not fully realize the dangers posed by the Soviet Union to Japanese holdings in Manchuria. To meet this threat, Kwantung Army officers took unilateral action to manufacture a casus belli between Japan and a Manchurian warlord that ultimately enabled Kwantung Army units to extend their control throughout Manchuria.¹ Following this so-called Manchurian Incident of 1931, Kwantung Army staff officers quickly forced the creation in early 1932 of a puppet state called Manchukuo.

Although the Kwantung Army had rapidly conquered Manchuria and with equal speed created a satellite state, its ultimate success could not be assured as long as the Soviet Union threatened the new Japanese possession on three sides. Kwantung Army officers and, eventually after accepting the fait accompli, their counterparts on the general staff in Tokyo viewed the creation of Manchukuo as an intermediate step in Japanese preparations for a war with the Soviets. The IJA, by exploiting the rich natural resources of Manchukuo, could renovate and modernize itself for the impending struggle. In 1937, however, the Japanese found

themselves fighting an unplanned war against China—a classic case of the wrong war at the wrong place at the wrong time against the wrong enemy.

As casualty lists from the China theater mounted (100,000 Japanese troops killed or wounded by December 1937), War Ministry and General Staff officers tried to bring hostilities to a rapid conclusion. In general terms, these officers may be divided into expansionists and anti-expansionists. The expansionists believed that any show of weakness by the Japanese would only encourage Chinese resistance. Only smashing military force would convince the Chinese of their errors. The anti-expansionists viewed the China War as a debilitating effort that was bleeding the IJA white while the main enemy, the USSR, continued a military build-up in the Soviet Far East and menaced Japan and Manchuria from the north. A common denominator between the two groups was that both accepted the premise that the Soviets were indeed Japan's number one foe. The expansionists preferred to eliminate by military force any potential Chinese threat to the Japanese flank in operations against the USSR. The anti-expansionists opted to end the senseless drain on IJA resources in order to use such resources to prepare for war with the USSR. Yet Japan's military and civilian leaders discovered no solution to stop the fighting, and by 1939 the IJA had twenty-five infantry divisions, and about one million men total, committed on the endless China front.

Since the Kwantung Army's mission, the protection of Manchukuo from Soviet aggression, remained unchanged, its main forces were not engaged in the China fighting. The IJA continued to strengthen and to expand

forces assigned to the Kwantung Army, whose size almost doubled from five infantry divisions in 1937 to nine infantry divisions by 1939 while that of the IJA rose from twenty-four to forty-one divisions. Nor was it difficult for the Kwantung Army to justify such troop augmentations. Increasing numbers of incidents—border violations, shootings, kidnappings—led in turn to increases in border security—pillboxes, barbed wire obstacles, new border guard units—all along the 3,000-mile Soviet Manchukuoan border.² As early as 1936 clashes between Soviet and IJA units involving mechanized forces and aircraft had occurred.

It became a vicious circle. As the Kwantung Army grew, so did the Red Army, from six rifle divisions in 1931 to twenty in 1936 with more than 1,000 tanks and a like number of aircraft. The Special Far Eastern Army became too large and loomed as a threat to Stalin. Consequently, in 1935 it lost its westerly elements with the creation of the Trans-Baikal Military District. After the Lake Khasan Incident in 1938, Stalin abolished the Special Far Eastern Army and established the 1st and 2d Special Red Banner Armies, responsible for the Ussuri and Amur areas respectively, both directly subordinate to the Defense Commissariat. Also in 1938 the 57th Special Rifle Corps moved into Outer Mongolia.³

In 1938 the IJA's 19th Infantry Division engaged in a bloody twelve-day struggle with the Red Army in mid-summer heat at Changkufeng/Lake Khasan on Korea's northern border with the USSR.⁴ Although the 19th Division was able to hold the ground until it had initially seized against fierce Soviet counterattacks, it suffered heavy losses. Over 500 Japanese troops were

killed and more than 900 wounded. Soviet losses amounted to 236 killed and 611 wounded.⁵ In the view of the IJA staff, however, the Soviets did not display innovative ground tactics or skillful troop deployments, thus confirming Kwantung Army observations that the ongoing purges of the Red Army had seriously impaired its battlefield efficiency. As a result, in early 1939 Kwantung Army headquarters adopted a more aggressive series of rules of engagement designed to crush any future Soviet encroachments on Manchukuoan territory.

Preliminary Skirmishes

In April 1939 the Kwantung Army drafted a new operations order called "Principles for the Settlement of Soviet Manchurian Border Disputes." Later that month the Kwantung Army commander, General Ueda Kenkichi, explained these new guidelines at a corps commanders' meeting.⁶ Henceforth, according to Operations Order Number 1488, Kwantung Army units could prevent both the frequency and escalation of border incidents by decisively punishing illegal Soviet violations. The same order authorized Japanese troops to invade Soviet or Outer Mongolian territory as required to achieve their objectives. In such cases, all Japanese dead and wounded would be collected from the battlefield and, along with enemy corpses or prisoners of war, would be returned to Manchukuoan territory. Locally, aggressive patrolling was expected and commanders had the right, in cases where the border was unclear, to determine the boundary for themselves.⁷ Empowered with such sweeping authority, IJA division com-

manders who were responsible for specific sectors of the long, unstable border would be expected to use it.

On 11 May, about two weeks after the promulgation of the new operations order, about seventy to eighty Outer Mongolian cavalry troops armed with heavy and light machine guns crossed the Halha River into Manchukuoan-claimed territory in search of grazing land and water for their horses. Near the village of Nomonhan they attacked a small Manchukuoan security force. A battalion-size Manchukuoan force in turn counterattacked the Outer Mongolians and succeeded in driving them back across the Halha River. The Mongolians abandoned five bodies, four horses, and considerable small arms and ammunition in their flight. The next day a like number of Outer Mongolian troops appeared southwest of Nomonhan but a 13 May counterattack against them by Manchukuoan troops proved unsuccessful. Such were the beginnings of what the Japanese called the Nomonhan Incident and the Soviets, Khalkhin Gol.⁸

To LTG Komatsubara Michitaro, commander of the IJA's 23d Infantry Division, which was stationed at Hailaerh, and in whose area of operations the incident had occurred, this latest border skirmish seemed to be typical. He believed that rapid application of sufficient force would quickly resolve the incident. Initial reports, wildly exaggerated, indicated that approximately 700 Outer Mongolian troops had transgressed the boundary. Komatsubara ordered a quick reaction force composed of the 23d Division's reconnaissance element (one cavalry company, one heavy armored car company, and a headquarters element—593 men total) and the 1st Battalion, 64th Infan-



Courtesy of Mainichi Shimbun

LTG Komatsubara Michitaro, Commander, 23d Infantry Division at Nomonhan.

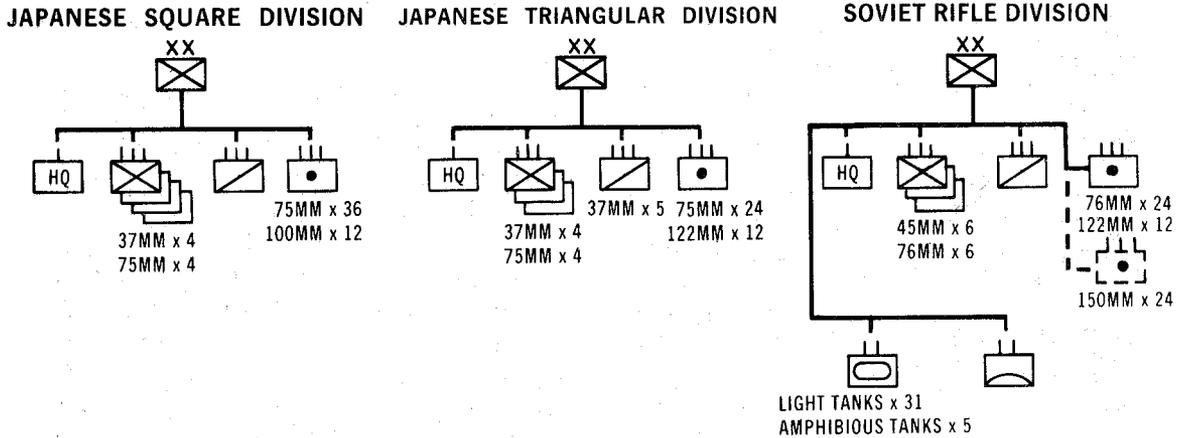
try Regiment (minus two companies) with a platoon of 37-mm rapid fire guns attached, along with 100 automobiles into the area.⁹ Japanese staff officers were having great difficulty even locating Nomonhan on their operational maps, so there seemed no reason to believe that additional force might be required to resolve the affray. Confident in their training and tactics, officers and men of the 23d Division eagerly anticipated putting their long months of preparation to use in battle.

The 23d Division was a relatively new division activated in July 1938 and sent to Manchuria for training one month later. Most of its enlisted troops

were first- or second-year soldiers conscripted from the southern Japanese cities of Fukuoka, Kumamoto, Hiroshima, and Oita. Traditionally troops from these recruiting districts proved to be able fighters, particularly in offensive operations. Imperial General Headquarters (IGHQ) had originally organized the division expecting to use it to garrison occupied areas in China. However, given the additional requirement to strengthen the Kwantung Army, IGHQ finally assigned the 23d Division responsibility for the defense of Heilungkiang Province in northwest Manchukuo.¹⁰ Despite the quality of its fighting men, Kwantung Army headquarters staff officers regarded the division as organizationally deficient to meet a major Soviet threat.

The maneuver elements of a triangular division like the 23d had one infantry brigade with three infantry regiments attached to it. Regular pre-1937 Kwantung Army divisions, like the 7th Division, to which the 2/28th Infantry was attached, were square—two brigades of two regiments each with three battalions per regiment. The triangular division had 12,000 men while the square division had 15,000. Furthermore, the triangular divisions lacked the artillery power needed to combat a first-line Soviet division. The 23d Division, for instance, had only sixty-five artillery pieces, including seventeen 37-mm guns, in its Table of Equipment compared to sixty-four artillery guns and sixteen 37-mm guns organic to the 7th Infantry Division.¹¹

TOE STRENGTHS FOR JAPANESE AND SOVIET INFANTRY DIVISIONS, 1939



Weapons and Doctrine

Debates had raged within IJA for a decade over whether or not the triangular division should be adopted as the main combat division organization. The decisive factor in the adoption of the triangular division was the realization among IJA planners that the triangular infantry division offered a quick way to increase the number of IJA divisions. Otherwise, by maintaining the square division, Japan lacked the resources and the IJA lacked the military budget required to expand the army. It was more economical to build triangular divisions. The army reorganization in 1936, by adopting the triangular plan, squeezed six new infantry divisions from the IJA's standing force of seventeen divisions.¹² The money saved by creating such "new" divisions was spent on tank and aircraft development. Operations during the China War also favored a light division since the Nationalist Chinese armies seldom used armor effectively and the Chinese Communists had none to use.

Within either type of division, the battalion was the IJA's smallest single tactical unit capable of conducting independent combat operations.¹³ Ideally the battalion consisted of a headquarters and four rifle companies of 194 men each, a heavy weapons company with eight 7.7-mm heavy machine guns, and a battalion artillery platoon of two 70-mm howitzers designed to support advancing infantry by destroying enemy machine gun nests. Each company had three rifle platoons, which in turn had three rifle squads each. A rifle squad had eleven riflemen and a 6.5-mm light machine gun crew, and each weapons squad had eleven more riflemen and three grenadiers carrying 50-mm grenade dischargers, often incorrectly referred to as knee mortars. There was, however, no battalion staff organization, so the battalion commander and his aide-de-camp had to coordinate all staff functions like logistics, intelligence, operations, and communications.

BATTALION WEAPONS

Weapon	Model	Caliber	Weight	Range meters		Rate of fire	Number of weapons per battalion
				MAX	EFF		
Rifle	Melji 38 (1905)	6.6-mm	9¼ lbs	3,700	2,850	10 rpm	686
Heavy Machine gun	Type 92 (1932)	7.7-mm	61 lbs (122 with tripod)	4,500	3,300	200-250 rpm	8
Light Machine gun	Type 96 (1936)	6.5-mm	20 lbs	3,700	2,850	150 rpm	25
Battalion howitzer	Model 92 (1932)	70-mm	468 lbs	*3,700		10 rpm	2
Grenade discharger	Type 89 (1929)	50-mm	10¼ lbs	666 **40.5		‡10 rpm ‡‡20 rpm	22
*Maximum effective range						‡Fired by one man	
**Minimum effective range						‡‡Fired by two men	

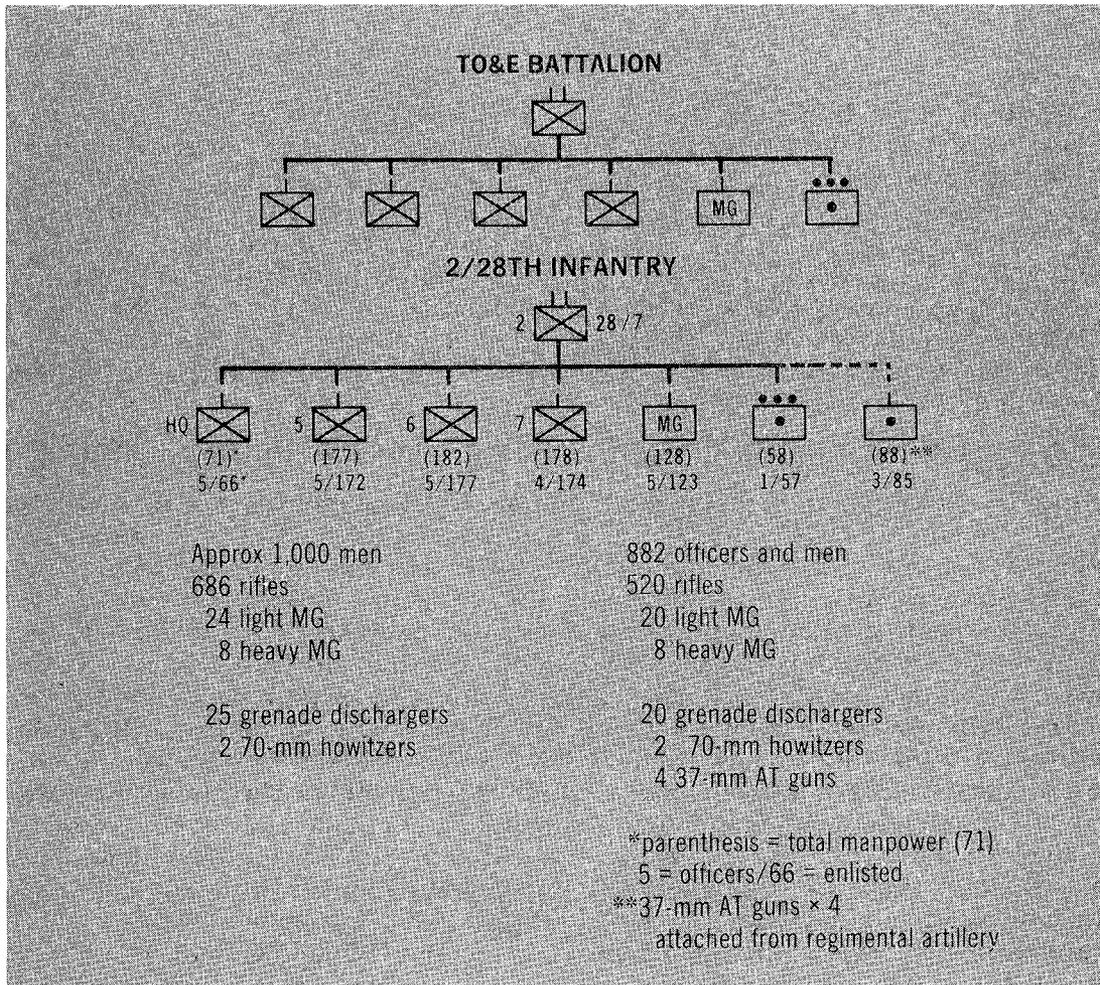
Source: CINCPAC. CINCPA Bulletin #55-45, 15 March 1945, *Japanese Infantry Weapons*. Originally restricted, downgraded to unclassified.

While this ideal battalion enrolled about 1,000 men, a comparison with the 2/28th Infantry at the time of the Nomonhan fighting shows that unit at about 80 percent strength.¹⁴

IJA units attached to the Kwantung Army, whether regular infantry divisions like the 7th or new divisions like the 23d, spent most of their time in Manchukuo undergoing rigorous training to prepare them to meet the Red Army. For the 7th Division, training exercises focused on infantry combat, hand-to-hand combat, infantry tactics as opposed to combined arms tactics, and spiritual training. Spiritual training emphasized a certainty in victory, loyalty and patriotic devotion to duty, military tradition, and esprit de corps

all premised on instilling the spirit of the offensive into every soldier.¹⁵

Every Japanese infantry training and drill manual from 1909 through 1945 stressed the importance of the role of the offensive in combat operations.¹⁶ The deadly new weaponry of the Russo-Japanese War and the staggering Japanese losses necessitated a new combat doctrine that would compel the infantryman to continue the fight even after he saw his friends killed or wounded. Based on the lessons of that war, the 1909 field manual emphasized the need to inculcate spiritual factors, such as the soldier's belief in his inevitable triumph and an unflinching offensive spirit, throughout the entire IJA.¹⁷ This reliance on the intangibles of battle re-



quired each soldier to possess an even higher morale and an aggressive spirit based on a zealous patriotism and esprit de corps. Morale, already at a high level during the Russo-Japanese War, received such increased emphasis that Japanese commanders came to rely on these intangibles to compensate for materiel and technological deficiencies on the battlefield. Such doctrine pervaded the IJA to the extent that by 1932 the manual advised division commanders that if the enemy forced them unavoidably to take the defensive, they still had to look for the opportunity to deliv-

er the "enemy a decisive blow by attacking."¹⁸

The IJA founded its battle doctrine on bold offensive operations. Thus it had to devise tactics suitable to apply such doctrine against its main enemy, the Red Army. Both the Russo-Japanese War and World War I had demonstrated that massed infantry formations on the battlefield were deadly anachronisms. The IJA, however, relied on the infantry as its main battle force, a force whose objective was to attack the enemy and destroy him in

hand-to-hand combat.¹⁹ IJA tacticians had to guarantee that the attacking Japanese infantry reached the enemy positions with a minimum of friendly losses. Thus, the 1920s and the early 1930s became times of significant doctrinal ferment within the IJA.

By 1920 IJA tacticians realized the need to disperse infantry formations in order to reduce losses when attacking a defender who possessed the lethal firepower of modern weapons. The revised 1925 edition of the *Infantry Manual* emphasized tactics designed to allow the attacker to reach the enemy defender's position. These included infantry cooperation with other combat arms, improved communications for command and control, night fighting and maneuver, coordination of infantry firepower with hand-to-hand combat, and increased reliance on the independent decision making ability of junior officers and non-commissioned officers.²⁰

Reliance on junior officers' leadership ability was central to the new tactics but it required high-quality, well-trained junior officers who were concerned about their troops' welfare and who matured by continual service with their regiments. In peacetime when an average Military Academy class might have 300—350 graduates and NCOs might be given commissions to leaven the junior officer force, the development of aggressive, independent junior officers was possible. However, junior officer attrition during the China fighting, abbreviated academy graduating classes each of more than 500 cadets, and officer training schools producing still more subalterns diluted officer quality. Furthermore, outstanding company grade officers achieved rapid promotion to field grade rank in order to alleviate the acute shortage of majors and

lieutenant colonels caused by the IJA's rapid wartime expansion. By 1941 only 36 percent of all IJA officers were Academy graduates and the percentage was even lower for company grade ranks.²¹ At the same time, the new revisions to the *Infantry Manual* required junior officers capable of exhibiting imaginative leadership and initiative.

The 1928 revised edition of *Infantry Manual* placed great emphasis on the use of cover and concealment to protect advancing infantry and reduced the distance to be covered in one dash by an infantry under enemy fire from fifty to thirty meters. Most of the revisions, however, stressed night combat and the requirement for night combat and maneuver training.²² Day and night dispersal tactics also required new weapons, and the revised manual paid particular attention to the use of the light machine gun and the grenade discharger.²³ Despite these alterations, the basic IJA reliance on offensive operations which culminated in hand-to-hand combat never changed.

By the 1930s, IJA planners realized more than ever that the Japanese army could not fight a war of attrition against the ever-growing might of the Soviet Union. Consequently, they designed and refined their tactics to wage a short war fought to a quick and decisive conclusion of hostilities (*sokusen sokketsu*). The goal of *sokusen sokketsu* was to encircle the enemy and then destroy him. The tactics employed to achieve that end relied on unit mobility, initiative, concentration of forces, night attack and night movement, and close cooperation between artillery and infantry.²⁴ Coupled with the spiritual or psychological values of offensive spirit and the belief in the absolute supremacy of Japanese arms, such tac-

tics produced one of the finest infantry armies in the world. It was, however, still an infantry army whose emphasis on the value of intangibles like morale or Japanese fighting spirit on the battlefield perhaps resulted from its status as an army poor in the weapons of modern warfare.²⁵ It was an army, in short, that tried to use doctrine to compensate for materiel deficiencies.

By 1939 battlefield experiences in China and against the Soviets seemed to confirm the validity of the Japanese way of warfare. In China time and time again numerically inferior Japanese forces routed Chinese troops. Against the Soviets at Changkufeng/Lake Khasan the decision was not so clear cut, but since that engagement also served to "prove" the efficacy of Japanese tactics, particularly night combat and hand-to-hand fighting, it merits closer attention.

The engagement that would provide a battle test for staff planners' theories began in the early morning hours of 31 July 1938. Members of the 1st Battalion, 75th Infantry, 19th Infantry Division launched a night attack against Soviet troops occupying an approximately 150-meter high ridgeline at Changkufeng/Lake Khasan. The attackers carried the position and, after fierce hand-to-hand fighting in the darkness, the Soviet troops fled in disorder.²⁶ The Japanese troops held their gains despite heavy losses during the next twelve days. More important, because this action was the first IJA night attack against the Red Army, tacticians regarded it as a brilliant success which strengthened their faith in the tactic of night attack.²⁷ Paradoxically, although all proponents of the offensive, these same tacticians paid greater attention to the defensive les-

sons of Changkufeng, particularly that a division in a strong natural or fortified position could resist successfully a three-division frontal assault.²⁸ Simultaneously, the IJA chose to overlook the superior firepower of the Soviet infantry and artillery and continued to stress the other intangible factors on the battlefield. To paraphrase the official Japanese history of Nomonhan, clearly a Japanese lack of firepower was the main reason for the emphasis on spiritual training, but contributing to the intangible factors was an absolute faith in night combat, especially a night attack that culminated in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy.²⁹

As the new conscripts of the 7th Division underwent their advanced infantry training on the dusty plains near Tsitsihar, its members concentrated on the three cardinal drills of the IJA: bayonet practice, firing practice, and maneuver. They learned, as did others before them, that a charge which carried them face-to-face to the enemy to kill him was the climax of infantry combat. Most of the riflemen were just completing their first year of company training, a year that contained thirty-eight weeks of night combat instruction averaging about ten hours per week. The men studied night attacks in various echelons, obstacle clearing, concealment, noise prevention, orientation at night, patrolling, and security.³⁰ Their officers taught them that night attacks exploited the unique Japanese characteristics of bravery, tenacity, shrewdness, and audacity.³¹ In May 1939 the men of the 7th Division perhaps were jealous that their comrades in the 23d Division were about to get the first crack at the Red Army at Nomonhan.

On 14 May 1939 the 23d Division's previously dispatched reconnaissance detachment, consisting of an armored car company and a cavalry squadron commanded by LTC Azuma Yaozo, arrived in the vicinity of Nomonhan. The following day Azuma, hoping to trap the Outer Mongolian troops on the east side of the Halha River, launched a two-pronged enveloping movement in conjunction with 150 Manchukuoan cavalrymen also from Hailaerh. The attack began at 1300, but the Outer Mongolian troops slipped through the closing pincers of the attempted encirclement and escaped to the western side of the Halha. Three squadrons of IJA aircraft bombed and strafed the area causing some damage to about twenty Mongol yurts. Since the Mongols had fled back across the border, Lieutenant General Komatsubara considered the incident closed and ordered the Azuma unit to return to Hailaerh.³²

A few days later, aerial reconnaissance and Manchukuoan cavalry reports revealed that about sixty Outer Mongolian troops had again crossed the Halha south of its confluence with the Holsten River. By 21 May, an estimated 300 to 400 enemy troops with at least two cannon and light tanks were busily constructing fortified positions both north and south of the Holsten River. That same day Lieutenant General Komatsubara ordered a task force headed by COL Yamagata Takemitsu, commander of the 64th Infantry Regiment, 23d Division, to move into the area and destroy Outer Mongolian forces. The 64th Infantry (minus two battalions), Lieutenant Colonel Azuma's reconnaissance element, a wireless communications platoon, transportation, and a field sanitation unit composed the task force. They set out to track down and destroy an elu-

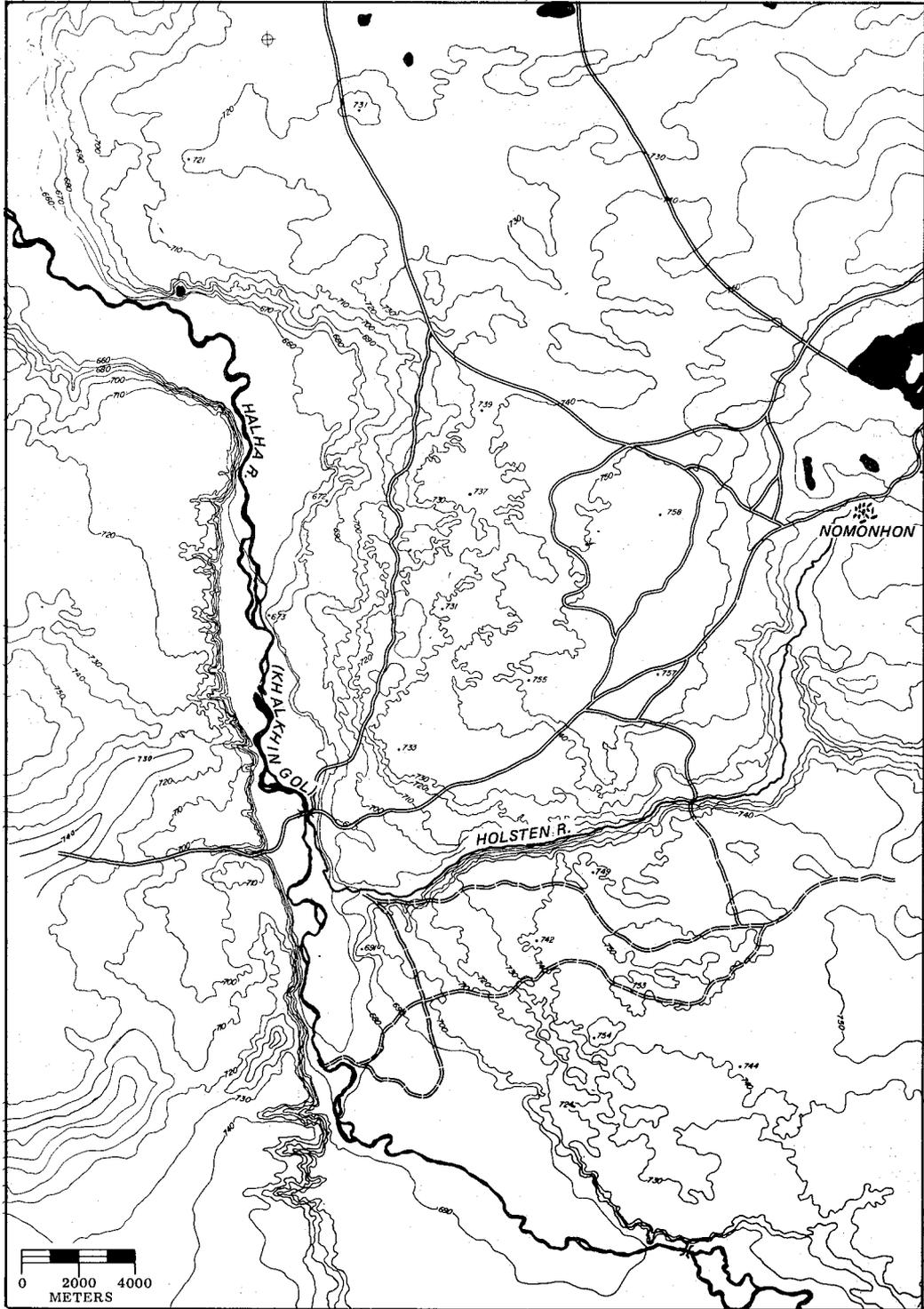
sive foe in the barren desert steppes around Nomonhan.

Terrain

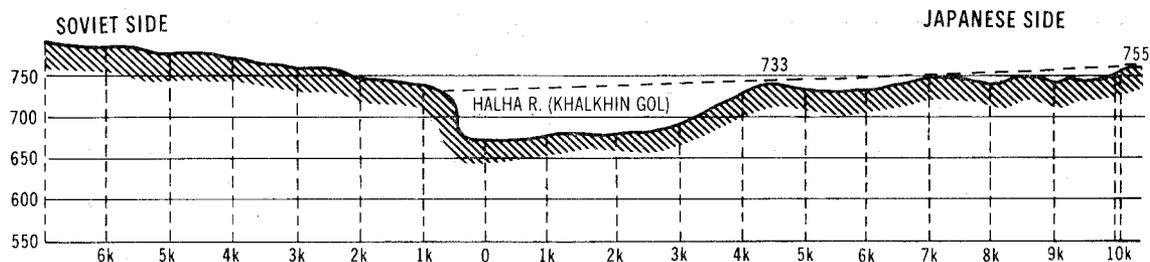
A fine sand, in places as much as ten centimeters (four inches) thick, covered the ground around Nomonhan. Underneath this sandy covering, the desert surface was generally firm enough to support wheeled transport. South of the Holsten River eucalyptus trees grew, but north of the river only shrubs or stubby one-meter (3 1/3 feet) high pines appeared. Short, coarse grass and wild flowers added a touch of color to the desert landscape but the lack of natural landmarks and the sameness of the sand dunes made map reading difficult. The infantryman found it extremely difficult to select readily identifiable reference points or to maintain his sense of direction.

Along the east, or Japanese, side of the Halha River ran a region of hills about forty kilometers (twenty-five miles) north and south and fifty kilometers (thirty miles) east and west. Elevation was about 700 meters above sea level. The terrain was desert characterized by rolling, undulating sand dunes twenty to forty meters high with ten-to-forty meter depressions. These features provided good cover and shelter for small infantry units but presented little obstacle for armor. Although roads in the area were often blocked by drifting sand, there was virtually no hindering terrain in the area of operations.³³ The Halha's west, or Soviet, side was a wasteland desert plain. (See Map 7.)

From the village of Nomonhan Japanese troops descended to the Halha over ground shaped like a basin the center of which was the confluence of



Map 7. Terrain features and roads near Nomonhan in 1939.



Terrain profile bordering Halha River (Khalkhin Gol).

the Halha and Holsten Rivers. The Holsten was between three and four meters wide and presented no impediment to military operations. It was, however, the sole source of potable water under water in the region. The swamp lands resulting from flash floods were almost all saline. There were many wells in the vicinity, but salt water also had contaminated most of these.

The tactically significant river was the Halha. It was an obstacle 100 to 150 meters wide with a sand bottom and a current of one to two meters per second. A band of intermittent swampland extended one or two kilometers away from the river on either side. The Japanese east bank had a 15° to 30° incline while the Soviet west bank rose steeply at a 75° pitch. At the Halha's confluence with the Holsten or where the Halha was fifty to sixty meters wide, the Japanese judged that individual troops could ford it but that entire units would have great difficulty crossing it. Moreover, the west bank of the Halha was higher than the east, thus exposing Japanese troops operating east of the river to enemy observation and to direct enemy fire.

Nomonhan's temperature range and climate were as harsh as its landscape. Beginning in June there were hot days but chilly, almost winterlike nights. Temperatures during July and August would be 30° to 40° C (86°–104° F) but fell precipitously to 17° or 18° C (58°–60° F) at night. These months were also the peak rainfall season and the combination of rain-soaked uniforms and cold night air made soldiers miserable. Mosquitoes whose appetites surprised even seasoned veterans plagued the men during the day and crickets screeched at them during the night. Mornings usually meant dawn fogs but a south or east wind would dissipate these quickly. In June there were more than sixteen hours of daylight, in July, fifteen and one-half hours, and in August, thirteen to fifteen hours.³⁴

Approximately one hour of dawn allowed Japanese infantrymen to see very close targets completely, but at 700 to 1,000 meters, the mid-ranges where enemy heavy machine guns and light artillery were found, observation was exceedingly difficult.³⁵

	Sunrise	Sunset	Dawn
May	0400—0430	1900—2000	
June	0400—or before	2000—2030	
July	0500—0530	2030—2100	64—48 minutes
Aug	0530—0630	2030—1930	48—39 minutes

The desolation of the region affected basic strategy, logistics, and the selection of lines of communications. IJA operations hinged on railroads as conventional IJA thought held that multi-division operations could not be conducted outside of a 200- to 250-kilometer zone from a major resupply base situated on a rail line. (See Map 8.) Nomonhan was approximately 200 kilometers south of the IJA base at Hailaerh, but it was about 750 kilometers from the nearest Soviet bases of operations at Borzya, USSR, and Ondorhann, Outer Mongolia, respectively. Looking at their maps, Kwantung Army planners estimated that large scale Soviet operations around Nomonhan would be impossible. They thought that the great distances from the nearest Soviet railhead insured that the Red Army could never concentrate large armor and infantry forces at Nomonhan. This meant, in turn, that the only Soviet

troops around Nomonhan would be those assigned to the 7th Border Guard Brigade. The 23d Division expected to encounter only Outer Mongolian and second-rate Soviet troops. Based on assumed Soviet capabilities, a single IJA division would suffice to handle this latest border flare-up.³⁶

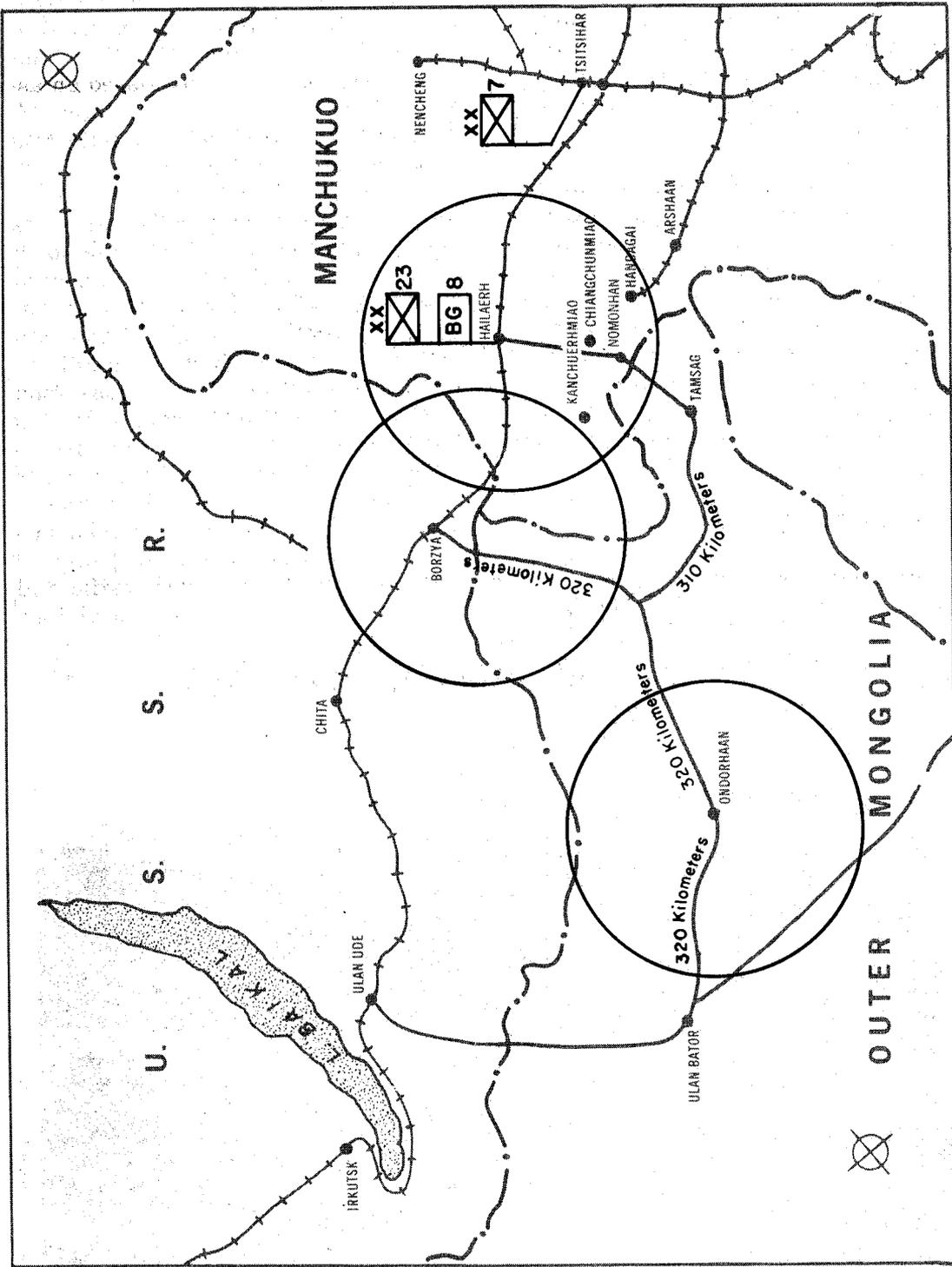
Roads from the Japanese railheads approached Nomonhan from the north and south. (See Map 9.) One northern approach from Hailaerh to Chiangchunmiao, the IJA staging area ten kilometers northeast of Nomonhan, was unimproved sand or grass road suitable for wheeled vehicles. It was also completely exposed to aerial reconnaissance and attack. An alternate route from Hailaerh via Kanchuerh-miao (approximately eighty-five kilometers northwest of Chiangchunmiao) could also handle wheeled traffic and was similarly exposed to aerial haz-



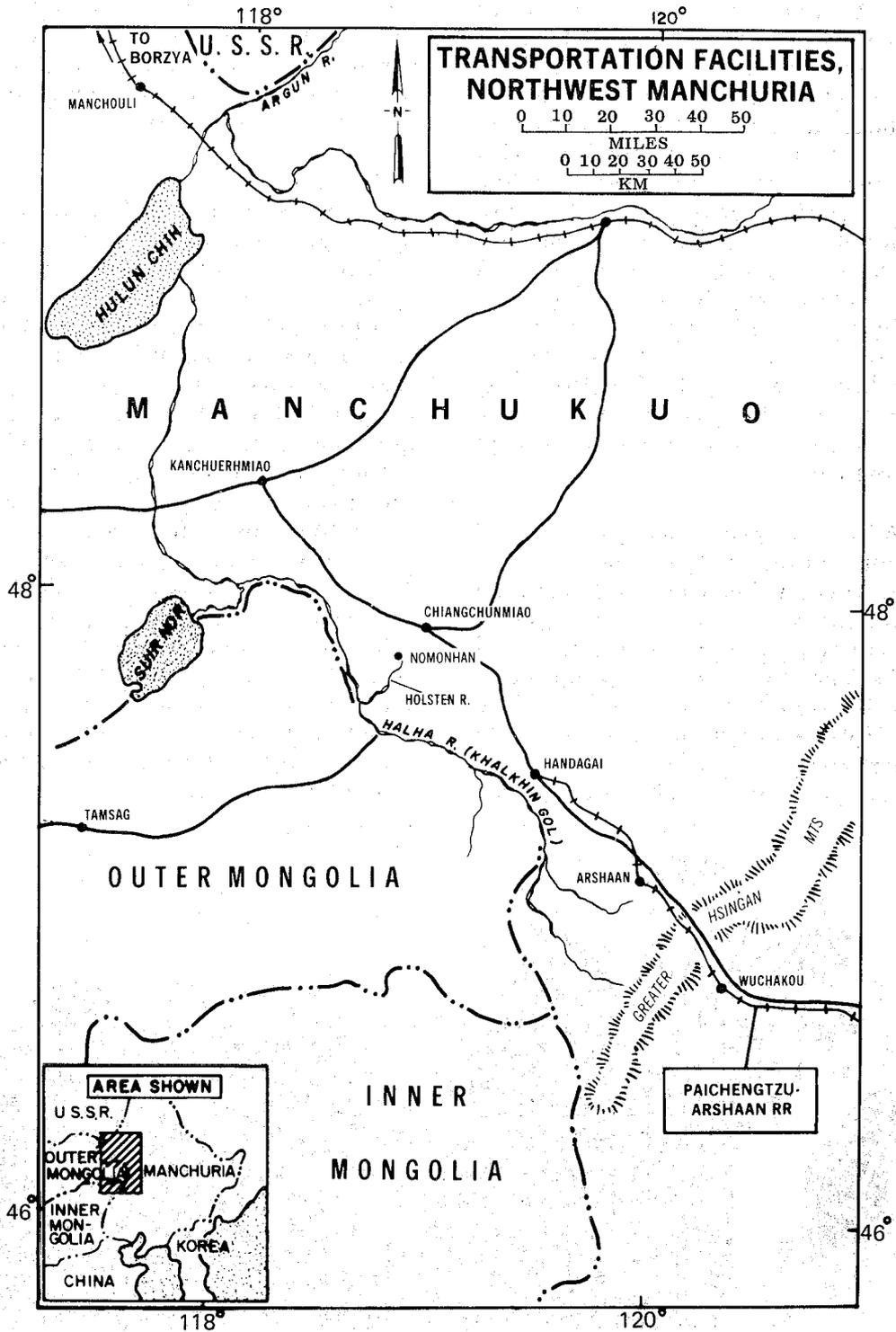
Near Arshaan troops of Yasuoka Detachment pulling a truck bogged down in

swamp on

Courtesy of Mainichi Shimbun



Map 8. The 250-kilometer radius of operations from major Japanese and Soviet bases.



Map 9. Transportation facilities.

ards. Additionally, there was no water between Kanchuermiao and Chiangchunmiao. From the south, the sixty-five kilometer road running from the railhead at Handagai to Chiangchunmiao became a bog in late June with the onset of the rainy season. While light repairs corduroying the road would allow trucks passage, about two-thirds or forty kilometers of the road were subject to flooding and rapidly could turn into a quagmire in which trucks sank to their undercarriages. The IJA employed the logistics route that ran from Hailaerh via Kanchuermiao which was used as a stopover and sorting point.³⁷

After supply convoys reached Chiangchunmiao, they could proceed southwest on the so-called Nomonhan Road, really little more than a track but capable of supporting trucks and tanks. The unimproved strip ran southwest through Nomonhan and north of the Holsten River to the Kawamata Bridge spanning the Halha. No significant roads existed south of the Holsten

although numerous tracks and trails crisscrossed the area both north and south of that river. It was into this hostile region that Colonel Yamagata led his 1,000-man task force.

Yamagata hoped to envelop what he estimated to be a few hundred Soviet border guards and Mongolian cavalymen occupying the Halha's east bank just north of the Holsten River. While a company-size diversionary attack fixed enemy attention to the front, the battalion would hit the enemy's northern flank. Lieutenant Colonel Azuma, as a separate force moving parallel to Yamagata's route, would advance ahead of the main force in order to block the Kawamata Bridge, the sole avenue of enemy escape. Lieutenant Colonel Azuma was so confident that the enemy troops would panic when Japanese regulars appeared, that he neglected to bring his 37-mm antitank guns for the operations. The Japanese expected to encounter light infantry and cavalry, not regular Soviet tank and motorized units.



Courtesy of Mainichi Shimbun

The 4th Transport Regiment carrying troops over the unimproved road from Handagai to Nomonhan on 2 July. From Nomonhan to the Halha River, trucks moved only at night and without headlights.

First Japanese Defeat

By dawn 28 May the 220 officers and men of Azuma's force were about two kilometers from their objective when Soviet and Mongolian infantrymen and ten tanks attacked their flanks. Soviet artillery from the Halha's west bank also began pounding the Japanese. Lacking both artillery to return fire and entrenching tools to dig in, Azuma's men hastily scooped holes out of the desert sand with their helmets as they sought protection from the barrage. Simultaneously, Soviet and Mongolian forces attacked Yamagata's battalion, preventing it from assisting the beleaguered Azuma unit which by nightfall had exhausted its ammunition. To make matters worse, almost all the members of two ammunition resupply squads from the Yamagata force who tried to reach Azuma's position under the cover of darkness were killed.

On 29 May 400 enemy infantrymen, supported by ten tanks and under the protection of an artillery barrage, again assaulted the Azuma unit. Surrounded and outnumbered, with casualties mounting, Azuma led seventy men in a last ditch attempt to break the enemy encirclement. Some did escape, but Azuma was not among them, for a Soviet infantryman shot him through the heart.

In the two days of fighting, the Azuma detachment lost eight officers and ninety-seven men killed and one officer and thirty-three men wounded, or 63 percent casualties. The next night, 30 May, Japanese troops, without any hostile interference, recovered the bodies of their slain comrades. Lieutenant General Komatsubara on the basis of

wireless reports then ordered the task force to return to Hailaerh.³⁸

The severity of the fighting seemed to catch the Japanese off guard. Japanese troops were surprised, for instance, that the pockets of abandoned Mongolian corpses contained neither food nor cigarettes, but were stuffed full of hand grenades and small arms ammunition.³⁹ Lieutenant General Komatsubara and Kwantung Army Headquarters regarded the battle as a draw and accepted that verdict because they believed that the Nomonhan desert was worth no more Japanese blood.⁴⁰ Throughout early June, however, reports of Soviet and Outer Mongolian activity near Nomonhan made it difficult to ignore the barren place. By mid-June Japanese intelligence indicated a buildup of Soviet and Outer Mongolian combined arms forces on both sides of the Halha. Additionally, Soviet aircraft flew daily reconnaissance sorties in the vicinity and also provided air cover for small-scale combined arms attacks on isolated Manchukuoan units.⁴¹ Faced with these repeated incidents, Lieutenant General Komatsubara, whose 23d Division had operational responsibility for the area, requested of the Kwantung Army permission "to expel the invaders."⁴²

Headquarters authorized Komatsubara's request chiefly because staff officers believed that the Soviets understood only force. The 23d Division's initial showing had not achieved success, so two tank regiments (seventy-three tanks and nineteen armored cars total) and the 2/28th Infantry, 7th Division, were attached to Komatsubara's command. There were staff officers such as MAJ Tsuji Masanobu who felt that overall operational control should be given to the 7th Division, the elite IJA

division in Manchuria. The difficulty with that concept was that removing Komatsubara from command would have been tantamount to relieving him, a very rare occurrence in the IJA.⁴³ Instead, with the entire 23d Division plus armor and artillery support, Komatsubara would have the forces necessary to fight a short war to a quick and decisive conclusion, the *sokusen sokketsu* of IJA military theorists.

Mobilization of the 2/28th Infantry

The 2/28th Infantry which joined the 23d Division was regarded as an excellent unit. Its officers and men came from northern Hokkaido and southern Sakhalin, areas which had been thought to produce tenacious and phlegmatic fighters. In June 1939, when the battalion received its orders for Nomonhan, it had been in Manchuria about sixteen months. MAJ Kajikawa Tomiji, the battalion commander, was a Military Academy graduate and a *Kendo* (swordsmanship) expert. He was also a seasoned veteran who in 1932 had commanded the 9th Company, 2/28th Infantry, in North China. Indicative of the strain of the China fighting, only four of the battalion's other officers were Academy men while six were officer candidate school graduates and twelve others were reserve officers recalled to active duty.⁴⁴ Most of the enlisted ranks were first- or second-year soldiers who were undergoing training and were learning the proud tradition of the battalion which dated from its participation in the Russo-Japanese War.

Five minutes past midnight on 20 June, members of the 2/28th Infantry were awakened in their barracks at

Tsitsihar to an emergency assembly order. The men learned that they would serve as a covering force for an armored task force being sent to Nomonhan. That morning they proceeded to the railroad station where (in universal military fashion) they waited about two hours for their train to leave. There was an undercurrent of excitement during the move to Arshaan as officers checked on air raid precautions. The initial deployment ended uneventfully at Arshaan just before noon the next day. There the 2/28th linked up with the Yasuoka Task Force (64th Infantry, 3d and 4th Armored Regiments).

Following a briefing on the enemy situation, the entire task force left Arshaan around 0220 on 23 June, using the darkness to conceal their departure. Although some motorization had occurred within the IJA, it still moved essentially by horse, relying on pack animals to transport a unit's supplies, ammunition, and artillery weapons.

The heavy June rains had turned the road to Handagai into a bog and made the march an exhausting one. The Japanese infantryman was burdened with a sixty-five pound pack filled with his spare clothing, rations, and tools. He also carried a 9½-pound rifle, sixty cartridges, two hand grenades, a canteen, and a gas mask.⁴⁵ The already heavily burdened foot soldier also had to help push and pull vehicles and horses wallowing in the muck.

The 2/28th Infantry took twenty-four hours to cover the sixty-four kilometers in the pouring rain. Not a single man dropped out of the march even though the troops were not allowed to eat their field rations because the march had not been expected to take so

long. After complaining to their battalion officers, the men were allowed to chew on a type of hardtack, but this only made them thirsty and they guzzled water at every break.

Despite the exhausting, backbreaking drudgery in the cold rain and mud, morale among Japanese troops was exceptionally high.⁴⁶ As they slogged through the mud, they were confident that they would make short work of the Red Army.

According to IJA psychologists' investigations after the action, almost all the Japanese troops mobilized in June eagerly looked forward to meeting the Red Army in combat but they had only vague notions of the potential consequences. Since most held the Red Army in low regard, the IJA's very presence near Nomonhan meant to them that the incident was as good as finished. The Japanese approach march then resembled more a peacetime maneuver than the deadly stalking of warfare.

One popular rationalization among the troops was that unlike the mauled Yamagata task force, "We have a lot of artillery so nothing like before should happen."⁴⁷ Such wishful thinking resulted from the mental baggage which the Japanese soldier carried, that is, his understanding of the Soviet mentality.

Japanese Stereotypes of the Soviets

Japanese officers got their impression of the Soviet mind from a short, classified manual titled *How to Fight the Soviets*, which appeared in 1933 under the imprimatur of the IJA Chief of Staff, Prince Kanin. The purpose of this forty-nine-page, handwritten manual was to serve as a guide for Japanese officers in planning their operations against the Red Army. The first chapter, on which the subsequent discussions of tactics were based, analyzed the characteristics of the Soviet



Courtesy of Mainichi Shimbun

The 72d Infantry Regiment, 23d Infantry Division, on its approach march to Nomonhan.

people and army. According to the manual, the Soviet people were submissive, docile, and prone to blind obedience. Subjected to outside pressure, however, they quickly fell victim to despair and depression. Likewise, since the Soviet soldier shared these national characteristics, he was capable merely of following orders and showing little, if any, initiative in his dull-witted, stolid manner.⁴⁸ The recent fighting at Changkufeng/Lake Khasan only demonstrated in the minds of Japanese officers the accuracy of these general observations.⁴⁹

The Japanese further felt that these Soviet national characteristics, in turn, created the Red Army's greatest flaw, the inability of Soviet units to cooperate with one another in encirclements or flanking maneuvers. The manual acknowledged that the Soviet soldier

could defend a front with tenacity because of his lack of imagination and initiative. An attack against the Soviet flank that threatened their supply lines would assure that the Soviet forces quickly fell into disorder. In short, this influential manual proposed taking advantage of the Soviet's racial defects in order to deliver a decisive blow that would destroy the Red Army. It seems an unlikely coincidence that such a stereotype could have developed independently of the tactical doctrine of *sokusen sokketsu*. Both concepts merged in *How to Fight the Soviets* because a lightning engagement with the Red Army followed by a decisive IJA victory would lead to the breakdown of Soviet morale.⁵⁰ So while the Japanese infantryman preparing to meet his Soviet counterpart could be in high spirits, his misunderstanding and misconceptions about the Red Army were about to exact a terrible price.