

Excerpts from Admiral N.G. Kuznetsov's memoirs

Memoirs of wartime minister of the navy

Victorious advance

Black Sea Fleet Goes Over Into the Offensive



In the beginning of 1943 Germany announced three days' national mourning for the 6th and 4th Armies that were wiped out or taken prisoner at Stalingrad. Though nobody could yet predict the end of the war, it would be fair to say that many people in the West no longer doubted that we would win. Hitler and his clique alone were unwilling to accept their inevitable defeat. The Nazi ringleaders were feverishly seeking for a way out of the crisis. They mobilised all their resources and called up all the Germans that were left over from the last "total mobilisation".

The character of operations in our naval theatres and also on the battlefronts underwent a change. Until then the fleets were under operational control of the fronts. When GHQ issued orders through the front commands or directly to the Military Councils of the fleets, it demanded that the sailors should above all defend the coasts together with the Army units and support the coastal flanks. When the situation was particularly bad, the Navy would form marine brigades in pursuit of orders from the Supreme Command. These formations fought like infantry on land. When our armies went over into a sweeping counteroffensive, the threat of enemy attacks on the flanks of our coastal armies from the sea no longer existed. The probability of enemy descents being landed behind our lines was reduced to a minimum. We now had to acquire a new thinking. It was time to switch over from defence to offensive-mindedness.

In the context of the new situation the Naval Staff made a detailed analysis of the conditions on the coasts and in the theatres of naval operations, where it was necessary to liberate naval bases and cities. A whole range of questions arose. What would the missions of the fleets be? Where would it be necessary (most probably) to land descents? What ships should be used in this situation?

In 1943, the Soviet forces were particularly active in the southern part of the country. That was why the Black Sea Fleet co-operated with the battlefronts in offensive operations before the other fleets started to do the same. Thus, the Black Sea Fleet helped liberate the Caucasus and then the Crimea.

One of the fleet's urgent tasks was to attack enemy shipping. On January 1, 1943, I sent a signal to the Military Council of the Black Sea Fleet. It read:

"According to available information, the Germans strongly rely on delivery of war supplies by sea from Romania to the Crimea and the Kerch Peninsula. Attacks on shipping at this time would effectively aid our forces fighting on the land front."

The Black Sea Fleet was ordered to conduct active operations against the enemy's sea routes.

My directive of January 30 and my order communicated by a telegram of February 4 confirmed the urgent need to attack enemy shipping, employing surface ships and the air arm. I made special emphasis on stepping up the operations in the Kerch Strait to thwart enemy shipping between the Taman Peninsula and the Crimea.

In pursuit of an order of the commander of the North Caucasian Front who was the fleet commander's immediate superior the Black Sea Fleet displayed higher activity in that area. The losses of the enemy in transport vessels, fighting ships and aircraft increased. The fleet air arm launched regular raids on enemy airfields.

In the eastern part of the Black Sea the fleet employed mainly its surface forces and the air arm. In the western part it was the submarines, mine-laying aircraft, torpedo and conventional bombers that were active on the enemy's sea routes.

...Early in 1943, the Nazis were forced to pass to the defensive in the Northern Caucasus. GHQ ordered the Southern and Transcaucasian Fronts to encircle and wipe out the enemy force there. The main part was to be played by the Southern Front and the Black Sea Group of Forces (under Lieutenant General I.Y. Petrov). The latter conducted its operations in close co-operation with the Black Sea Fleet.

The sailors prepared for these engagements with great enthusiasm. Among other missions it was intended to liberate Novorossiisk, an important port.

In the latter half of November 1942, when the Battle of Stalingrad was raging furiously, I was summoned to GHQ and received by J.V. Stalin. He said that the General Staff was working on an offensive operation in the south. He asked me to prepare proposals on the fleet's operations. When I arrived at the General Staff, I learnt, as it frequently happened, that the plans had already been drawn up. The General Staff only wanted to know a few details. In the operation of Novorossiisk the ships and coastal defence batteries of the fleet were to provide Fire support to the Forty Seventh Army in the penetration of enemy defences. The fleet was to land a descent in proximity of Yuzhnaya Ozereika, which was to assist the units of the Forty Seventh Army in the taking of Novorossiisk. The submarines and air arm were to disrupt the enemy's shipping between the Crimea and the Taman Peninsula. At the same time the fleet was to assure uninterrupted delivery of war supplies by sea along the Caucasian coast.

Though the plan for the landing of descents at Yuzhnaya Ozereika and Stanichka was worked out in haste, it was thorough and detailed. It was decided that sailors would be in the assault wave. To this end I issued an order transferring the 255th Marine Brigade, the 323rd, 324th and 327th Marine Battalions to the Black Sea Group of Forces. The descents and ships engaged in exercises in daylight and darkness to achieve efficient cooperation between all the forces carrying out the operation.

The main descent was to be landed at Yuzhnaya Ozereika and the secondary descent at Stanichka. Rear Admiral N.Y. Basisty was charged with the transportation and landing of the main descent. His ships were to provide artillery support to the descent and protect the transport vessels.

On January 27, 1943, the left flank of the Black Sea Group of Forces (of the Transcaucasian Front) went over to the offensive before it was able to regroup its units. The fleet air arm, six coastal defence batteries and the cruiser Voroshilov supported the Army. But the assaults were unsuccessful. It also proved

impossible to land the descent. The enemy had concentrated a large force on the shore. In addition, a strong gale was blowing and the sea was rough. The wave that had been landed was ordered to break through the enemy dispositions and force its way to Stanichka.

The landing operation at Stanichka was more successful. The arrival of ships there was a surprise for the enemy. Coastal defence batteries effectively supported the assaults of the descent. Another reason why the landing went off successfully here was that the enemy's attention was focussed on beating off the assaults of Army units and our descent at Yuzhnaya Ozereika. Major Kunikov's detachment numbering 900 officers and men secured a foothold and consolidated the ground. The fleet commander took advantage of the situation to land the main body of the descent there. Thus, the secondary attack was turned into the main attack. By February 15, 17,000 troops, tanks and artillery were holding the beachhead. It had a frontage of seven kilometres and a depth of three-four kilometres. Owing to lack of forces the descent was unable to develop the offensive. In addition, the situation was complicated by lack of support from land. The Forty Seventh Army failed to penetrate the enemy's defences.

The Naval Staff closely watched the developments and regularly reported the situation to me. Moscow tried to help, although it was difficult to do so. The fleet command was also doing its best to develop the offensive, but was unable to do very much.

Despite this, the descents landed near Novorossiisk played a big role. The beachhead at Stanichka, which later became widely known as Little Land, compelled the enemy to divert a large force.

On February 18, I was summoned to GHQ. I was ordered urgently to go to the Black Sea Fleet and to supervise the transfer of troops to Gelendzhik, which were to be moved to Little Land.

A group of generals under Lieutenant General S.M. Shtemenko, chief of operations department of the General Staff, immediately proceeded to General I.I. Maslennikov's headquarters. He was then preparing for an offensive. I went by car to Tuapse via Shapsug Pass. When I arrived there practically all the troops had been moved. The last units were already aboard the destroyers *Nezamozhnik*, *Besposhadny* and *Soobrazitelny* on February 25.

We already knew that GHQ decided to build up the strength of the forces near Stanichka, because this beachhead offered an advantage for subsequent development of an offensive in the direction of Novorossiisk.

By the end of February, there were two - a descent and an infantry - corps in Stanichka. These formations expanded the beachhead bringing the frontline to the suburbs of Novorossiisk. The length of the frontage was now 45 kilometres.

I suddenly learnt that it was proposed to land another big descent there.

When Marshal G.K. Zhukov, General S.M. Shtemenko and I arrived in the Novorossiisk zone, Georgi Konstantinovich studied at the staff of the 18th Army under General K.N. Leselidze the possibilities for further enlargement of the beachhead.

The forces in Little Land were engaged in heavy fighting. From a hill on the outskirts of Novorossiisk you could get a good view of the whole of Tsemesskaya Harbour. But you could not see the beachhead because it was enveloped in smoke. The roar of the artillery could be heard distinctly. Air engagements were being constantly fought overhead.

During the war, I seldom went to the battle zone together with Marshal G.K. Zhukov. But though I was in his company only a few times, I could not help seeing that he was a distinguished military leader. He had a knack for making a quick and accurate estimate of events and people. He would grasp the situation deeply and comprehensively. He would see the main point, he would trust people but also check them.

Marshal Zhukov and I increased the flow of supplies to Myskhako. The importance of that beachhead was already obvious. As Zhukov and General Shtemenko studied the possibilities for the penetration of the Nazi Blue Line (which the Germans were constantly fortifying) they pinned big hopes on the forces holding Little Land. That was why Zhukov wanted to know all the details about the flow of supplies to the beachhead by sea.

Although it seemed that Little Land was very close to us (only ten miles away from our shore), the space was covered by enemy cross fire.

G.N. Kholostyakov, the base commander, said that every run to Myskhako involved serious difficulties. Ships and vessels (mainly small vessels and craft) would make their way only in darkness. To conceal their movement smoke screens would be laid. Special ships and craft would be assigned the mission of diverting the enemy's attention. Other methods were devised to allow the ships and vessels to slip through without detection. Coastal defence battery fire and large forces of the fleet air arm would cover the vessels carrying troops and supplies.

Each venture of supply ships to Little Land was planned like a full scale combat operation. The transport vessels and craft, and escort ships would be carefully prepared for the move, and routes would be plotted to take the enemy by surprise. The time of departure would be changed each time, depending on the situation. Reconnaissance would plot the enemy batteries. The crews of coastal defence batteries would take advantage of the wealth of experience acquired by the defenders of Leningrad in counterbattery fire. Our batteries and the air arm would bombard the Nazi batteries. Sometimes short, but violent engagements would be fought. Gun fire, shell bursts, hundreds of flares and beams of numerous search-lights would illuminate the harbour brightly. It would seem that it was broad daylight. While our ships headed for Little Land and discharged their cargoes there, battles would rage at sea, on land and in the air.

Despite formidable odds, we managed to supply the beachhead with all that it needed and to build up a force there, which later helped liberate Novorossiisk.

The Army and fleet air arm fliers provided reliable air cover to the beachhead until they gained air supremacy over Novorossiisk.

Having appraised the situation that had taken shape G.K. Zhukov agreed with us that, at the moment, it was inexpedient to land another big descent on Little Land. In my presence he reported this opinion to GHQ over the phone. Moscow accepted it.

At the proposal of Zhukov it was decided to discontinue the attack on the North Caucasian Front in order to prepare the formations for further determined action.

Soon after I returned to Moscow I was summoned to GHQ on April 22 or 23. Stalin asked me who I thought fit for the post of Black Sea Fleet commander.

I knew that the Supreme Commander-in-Chief was displeased with F.S. Oktyabrski. But I did not know that he was so deeply displeased. The unsuccessful landing at Yuzhnaya Ozereika must have had something to do with it too. I knew I could not do anything to help Oktyabrski. GHQ had already taken the decision on his removal. I proposed Vice-Admiral L.A. Vladimirski. Until then he was in command of the main fleet detachment. He was a determined and shrewd commander.

Before that throughout the war, not a single fleet commander had been removed from his post. But Oktyabrski, owing to circumstances, was removed from that post only temporarily. In less than a year, in March 1944, he was reappointed to the post of commander of the Black Sea Fleet. During that he was commander of the Amur River Naval Flotilla.

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