

# *The Nomonhan Campaign (May—September 1939): A Summary*

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## *Japanese Initiatives*

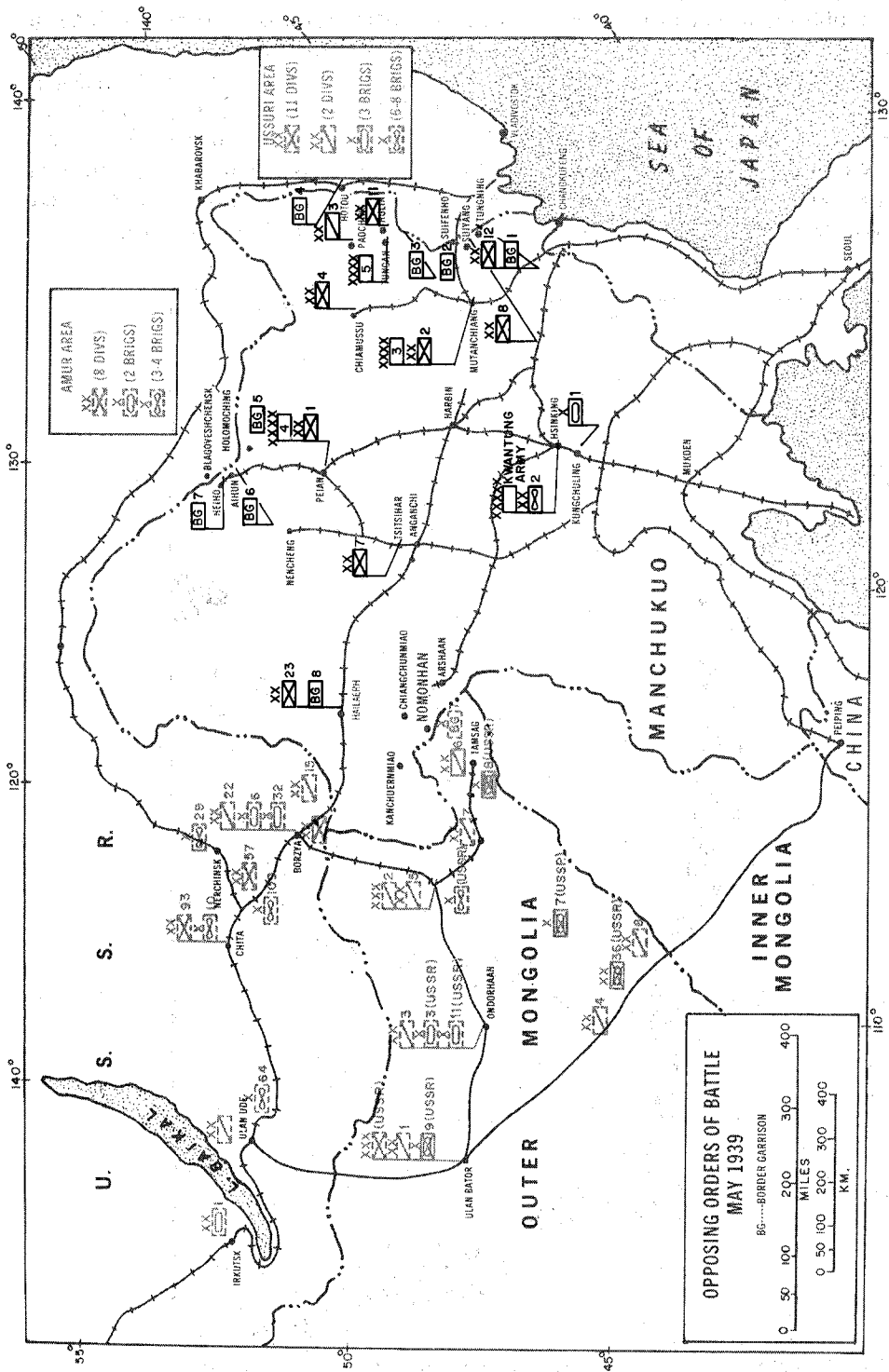
The Imperial Japanese Army's take-over of Manchuria in 1931 brought Japanese and Soviet armed forces eyeball to eyeball along a 3,000-mile border. Numerous border skirmishes and disputes characterized the next several years as both sides reinforced their respective forces. In 1936 the Soviets signed a mutual assistance treaty with

Outer Mongolia, and in January 1937 the Soviet High Command organized the 57th Special Rifle Corps consisting of the 36th Motorized Rifle Division, 6th Cavalry Brigade, 11th Tank Brigade, and 7th, 8th, and 9th Armored Car brigades. These units moved into Outer Mongolia in 1938.<sup>1</sup>



Courtesy of Mainichi Shimbun

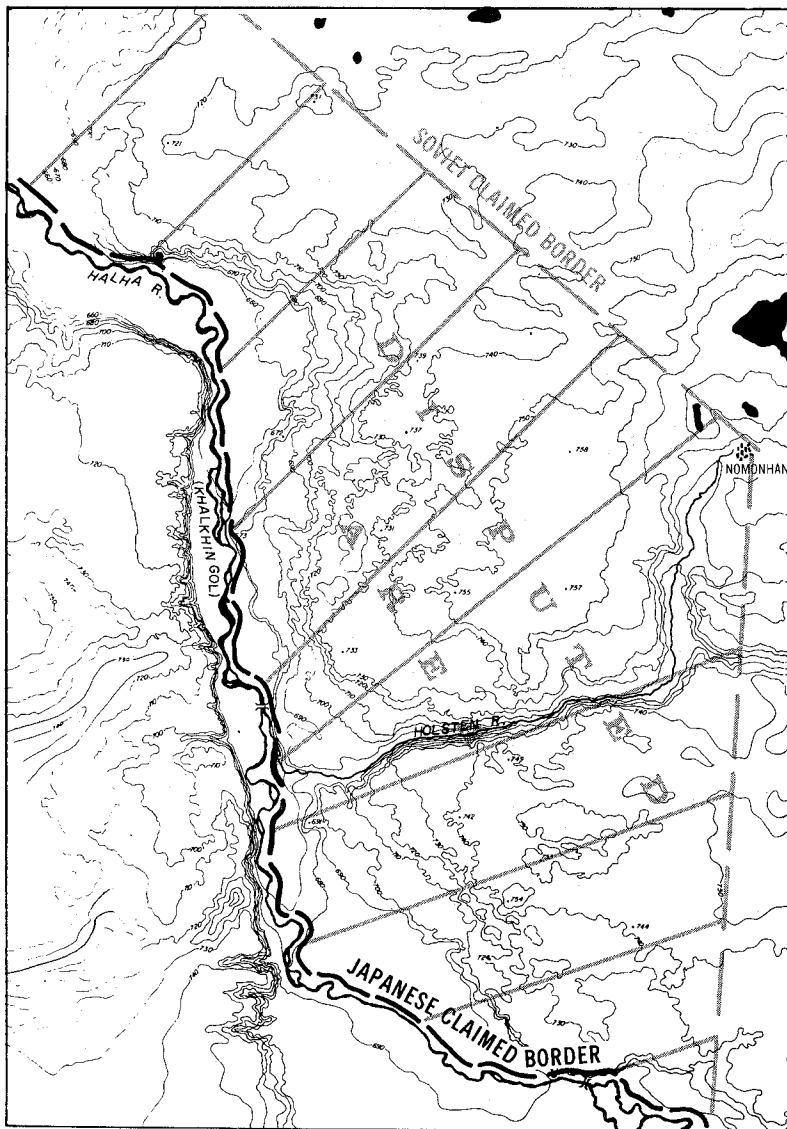
The 72d Infantry Regiment, 23d Infantry Division, approaching Nomonhan in early July.



Map 1. Opposing orders of battle.

An especially bloody affray at Changkufeng/Lake Khasan in 1938 resulted in over 2,500 casualties on both sides. It also seemed to stiffen Soviet resolve because the following year, Joseph Stalin, speaking before the Eighteenth Soviet Party Congress in March 1939, warned that any acts of aggression against the inviolable Soviet frontiers would be met by twice the

force of any invader. Two months later, a handful of Soviet allied Outer Mongolian cavalry troops wandered into a disputed border area between the Halha River (Soviet name, Khalkhin Gol) and the tiny village of Nomonhan. The Japanese claimed that the boundary followed the river, but the Soviets maintained that it passed just east of the village of Nomonhan.



Map 2. Disputed border area between Nomonhan and Khalkhin Gol in 1939.

On 11 May 1939 Japanese sponsored Manchukuoan\* cavalymen drove the Outer Mongolians back across the Halha River. Two days later, however, the Outer Mongolian cavalry forces returned to the same location, but the Manchukuoan troops were unable to evict them. The Japanese Kwantung Army, the designation for Japanese forces stationed in Manchukuo, then stepped into the act. Its 23d Infantry Division was responsible for border security in the region where the skirmishes had occurred. The commander of the 23d Division ordered its 64th Infantry Regiment (minus two companies) and its reconnaissance element to drive the Mongolians from the Japanese claimed border area.

LTC Azuma Yaozo on 14 May led the reconnaissance element into the disputed territory, but the Outer Mongolian troops refused to fight and retreated across the Halha. A Soviet and Outer Mongolian build-up, however, continued in the area, and Azuma returned one week later to oust the intruders. This time the enemy surrounded and annihilated Azuma's force. Despite this bloody setback, the Kwantung Army wanted to drop the matter, but more

*\*The Japanese established a puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932 in the Chinese provinces known collectively as Manchuria.*

and more Soviet troops poured into the area. (See Map 3.)

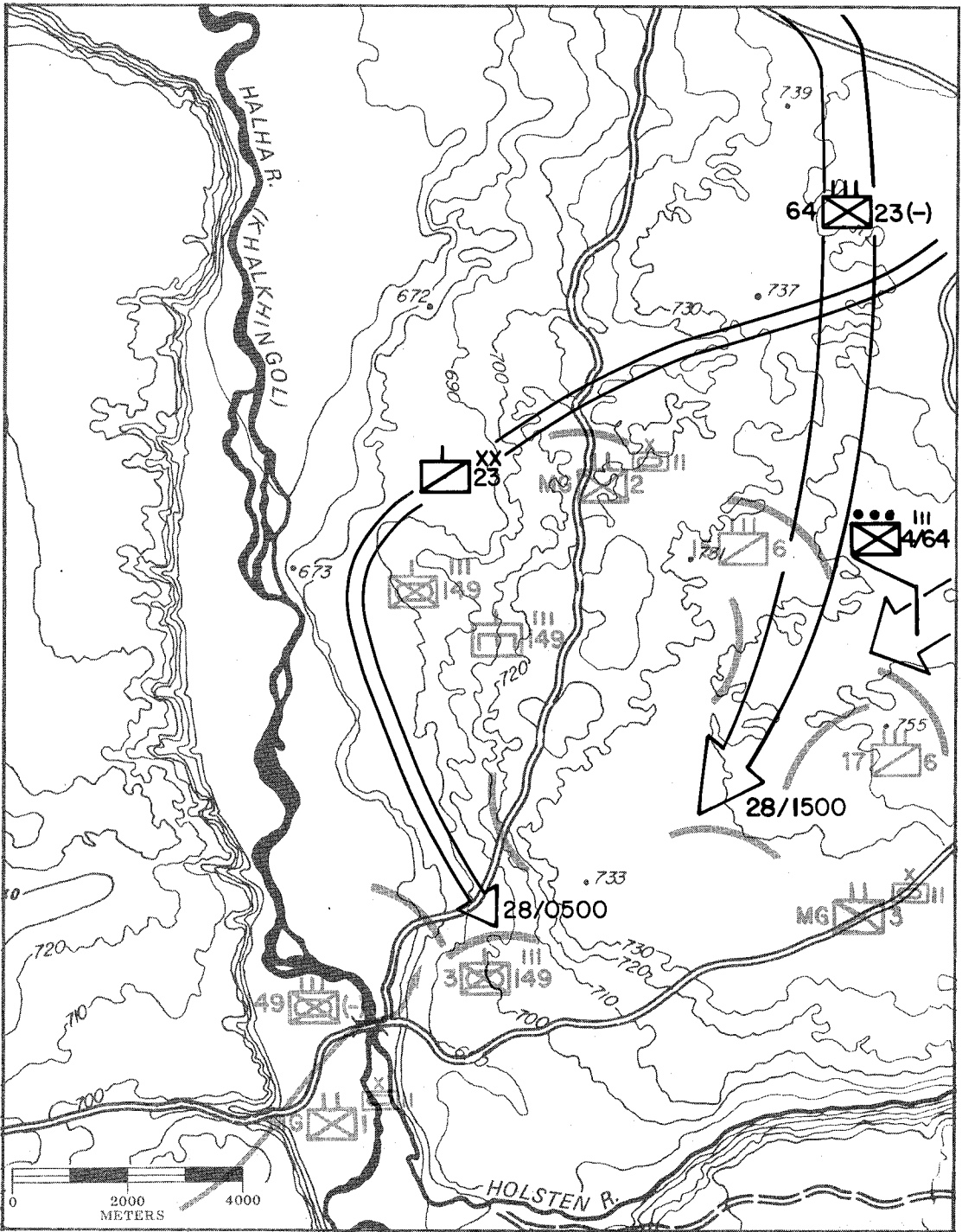
The Kwantung Army decided that a division size attack was needed to oust the Soviets and their allies. This operation began on 1 July when the 23d Division's 71st and 72d Infantry Regiments seized the high ground overlooking the Halha about eighteen kilometers north of its confluence with the Holsten River. On 2 July this force crossed the Halha and drove Soviet units from Baintsagan Heights. Simultaneously, an armored task force consisting of the 3d and 4th Tank Regiments (seventy-three tanks total), the 64th Infantry Regiment, and the 2d Battalion, 28th Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, attacked Soviet positions on the Halha's east bank. (See Map 4.)

Although initially successful, the Japanese drive on the Halha's west bank stalled by dusk of 3 July. General Zhukov, realizing the Japanese threat to his artillery on the west bank, committed his 11th Tank Brigade (minus one battalion), 7th Motorized Armored Brigade, and the 24th Motorized Rifle Regiment of the 36th Motorized Rifle Division, including approximately 186 tanks and 266 armored cars, against the Japanese forces on the west bank. Zhukov accepted the risk of sending

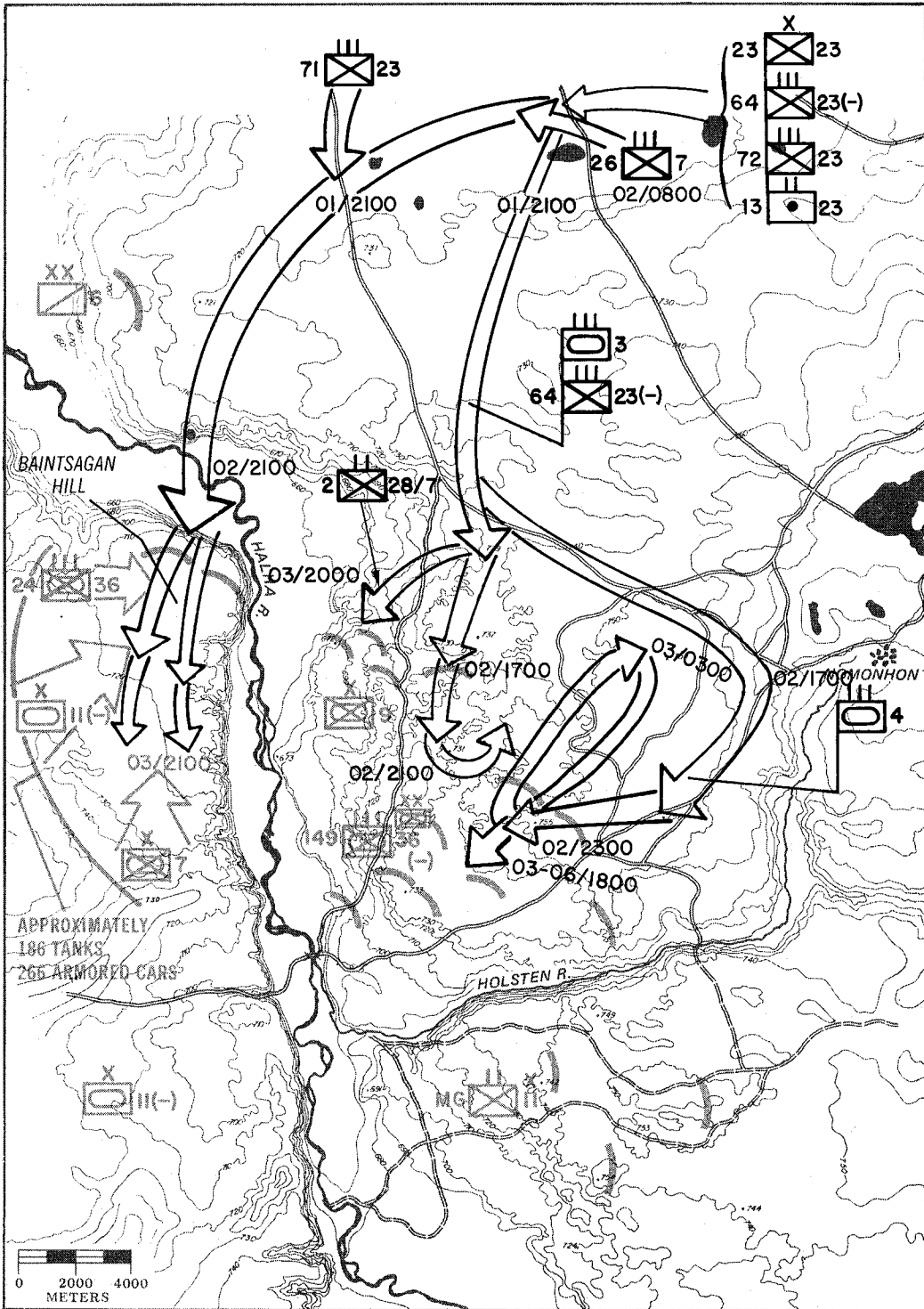


Courtesy of Mainichi Shimbun

Japanese infantry with heavy machine gun operating on west bank of Halha probably on 3 July. Note two Soviet armored cars.



Map 3. Destruction of Lieutenant Colonel Azuma's reconnaissance unit 28 May 1939.



Map 4. Japanese general offensive 1-4 July 1939.

armor unsupported by infantry against the Japanese soldiers because his own infantry formations still had not appeared at the front, and he believed that to await their arrival would squander an opportunity to destroy the Japanese.

The unsupported Soviet tanks and armored cars rolled forward and did blunt the Japanese offensive. The cost, however, to both sides was high. Japanese troops destroyed at least 120 Soviet tanks or armored cars with Molotov cocktails, 37-mm antitank guns, and antitank mines. The Japanese, in turn, lost several hundred troops killed or wounded. Moreover, the Japanese forces depended for resupply on one pontoon bridge across the Halha, the rest of the Japanese bridging equipment having been diverted to the China front. This single bridge proved unable to handle the amount of ammunition and equipment required if the Japanese were to continue the battle. Over the next two days, consequently, the Japanese withdrew to the east bank of the Halha.

Meanwhile both Japanese tank regiments operating on the east bank had failed to break through Soviet defenses despite the loss of half their armor. The 64th Infantry and 2/28 Infantry also could not penetrate Soviet lines. After the repulse of this two-pronged attack, the battle centered on Japanese attempts to wrest Hill 733 from the Soviets.

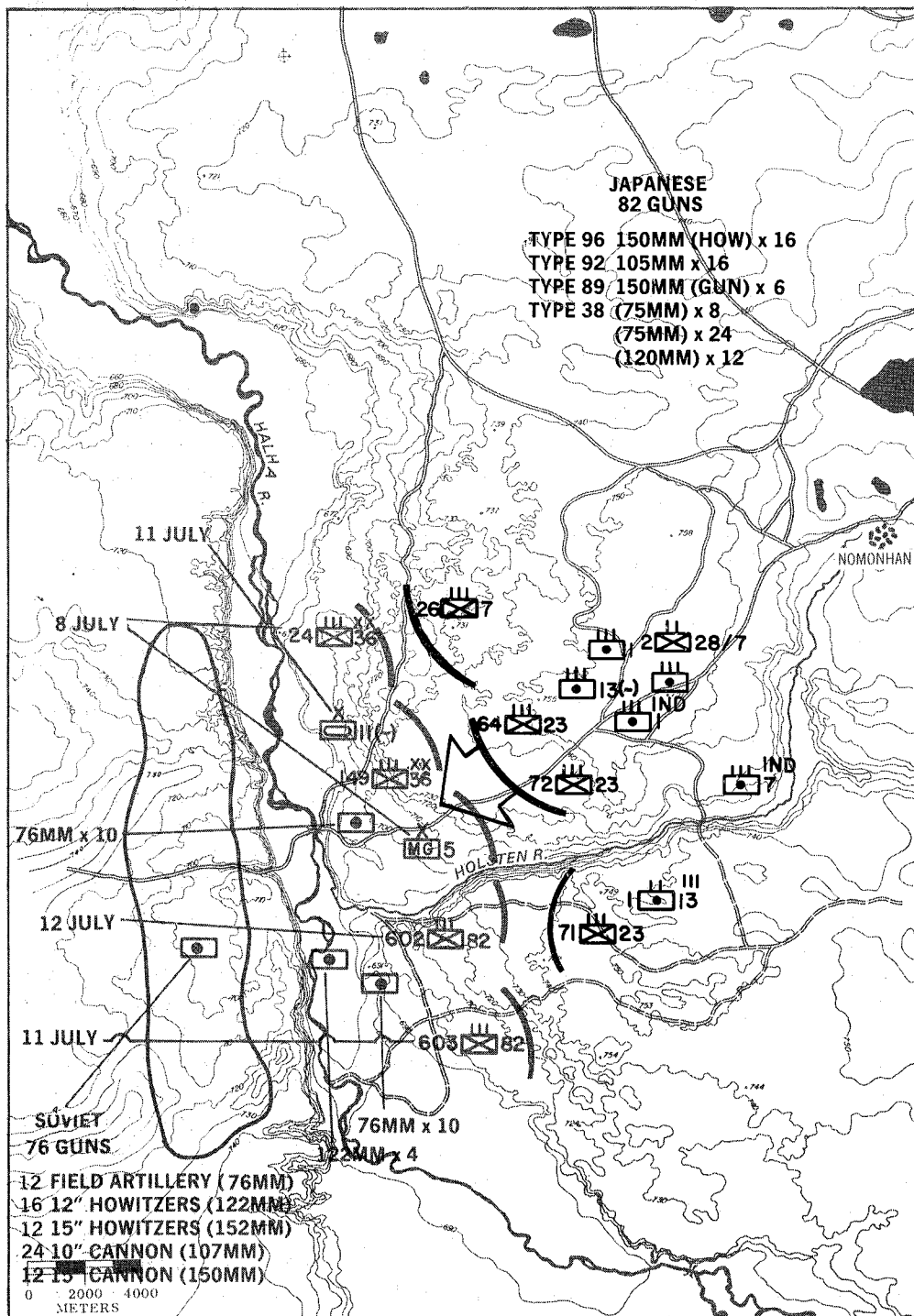
From 7 through 22 July, a four-kilometer wide front stretching from the Holsten River to just north of Hill 733 was the location of the heaviest fighting. The Soviets continued to reinforce their positions, as the 24th Motorized Rifle Regiment, 11th Tank Brigade,

149th Motorized Rifle Regiment, 5th Machine Gun Brigade, and 602d and 603d Rifle Regiments of the 82d Rifle Division established themselves on the Halha's east bank.

Unable to evict the Soviets from the east bank, the Japanese moved in more artillery guns to prepare for a late-July general offensive. The Soviets also increased their artillery, placing twenty-four artillery pieces on the east bank and another seventy-six on the west. By shipping artillery units to Manchukuo from Japan, the Japanese managed to accumulate eighty-two artillery weapons. (See Map 5.)

On 23 July the 64th and 72d Infantry Regiments launched a frontal attack against elements of the 11th Tank Brigade, 149th Motorized Rifle Regiment, and 5th Machine Gun Brigade. The Japanese had expected that their intense artillery preparation would silence the Soviet artillery batteries and allow the Japanese infantry to drive the Soviet infantry back across the Halha. Soviet gunners quickly disabused them of that erroneous notion. Even though Japanese artillery pieces fired over 25,000 rounds from 23 to 25 July, the Soviets responded with a greater volume of counterfire. While the Japanese did succeed in pushing the Soviets back, Japanese casualties continued to be heavy. More than 5,000 Japanese troops had been killed or wounded from late May through 25 July.

After the limited Japanese gains, both sides settled down to a war of attrition along a thirty-kilometer front. North of the Holsten River, a Japanese reconnaissance unit guarded the northern flank from Hill 721. About twelve kilometers south, the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, and the 64th



Map 5. Japanese general offensive 23—25 July 1939.



and 72d Infantry Regiments held the line. The Soviet 36th Motorized Rifle Division and 5th Machine Gun Brigade opposed these forces. South of the Holsten, the 8th Border Guards Regiment, 2/28th Infantry Battalion, and 71st Infantry Regiment held a fifteen-kilometer front. The Soviet 82d Rifle Division opposed them.

## *The Soviet Offensive*

Throughout early August, probing attacks and occasional battalion-sized assaults by the Soviets characterized the activity on the battleground. Soviet artillery gained superiority and daily pounded Japanese positions. At the same time General Zhukov built up his forces in preparation for a great Soviet offensive. The Soviets completed these preparations in complete secrecy, concealing the movement and disposition of their forces.

Zhukov launched his offensive along a thirty-kilometer front and caught the Japanese defenders offguard. He concentrated two rifle divisions, two cavalry divisions, a motorized rifle division, a machine gun brigade, two tank brigades, and two motorized armored brigades against slightly more than two Japanese infantry divisions. (See Map 6.)

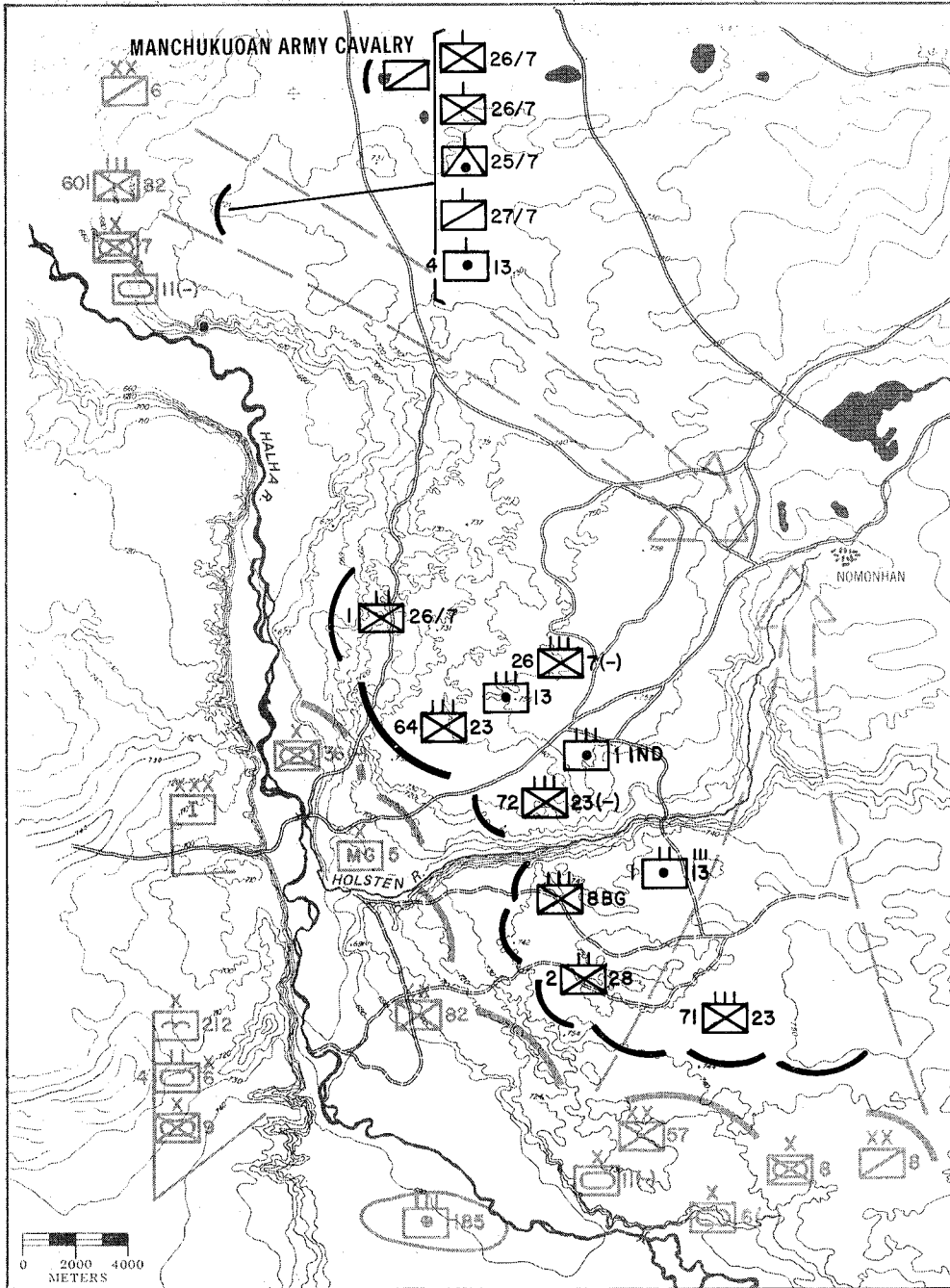
	<i>Soviet</i>	<i>Japanese</i>
Manpower	57,000	30,000
Infantry		
Battalions	35	18
Tanks	498	-
Armored Cars	346	-

Fighting was savage. The 7th Motorized Armored Brigade and 601st Rifle Regiment stormed Hill 721 but failed to

take the heights. In the center, Soviet units had the responsibility to engage as many Japanese forces as possible so that the Japanese would be unable to reinforce their flanks. The southern front was where Zhukov concentrated his armor, over 320 tanks plus an armored car brigade. Supported by an infantry division, the armor quickly turned the Japanese left flank and drove north toward Nomonhan.

Due to the ferocity of the fighting on Hill 721, the commander of the 23d Division mistakenly believed that the main Soviet thrust was directed against his right flank. As he sent reinforcements to the north, the strong Soviet armor units to the south cracked through Japanese defenses and isolated the 8th Border Guards Regiment and 2/28th Infantry Battalion. Four days of bitter fighting broke the Japanese defense of Hill 721, and the Soviet northern pincer then rushed south to complete the encirclement of the 23d Division.

The Soviets apparently were content with driving Japanese units east of Nomonhan, but they also may have lacked the resources in manpower and materiel to conduct a vigorous pursuit. As the Soviet offensive halted and Soviet troops dug in, a new blitzkrieg style of warfare unveiled itself on the plains of Poland. Faced with the drastically new situation in Europe, the antagonists at Nomonhan/Khalkhin Gol suspended major military operations. The tempo of diplomatic negotiations already underway between Japan and the Soviet Union quickened and the fighting diminished in early September. A cease-fire was declared on 16 September. Japanese losses in the four months of fighting were extremely heavy: over 17,000, including 8,440



Map 6. Soviet plan of operations 20 August 1939.

killed and 8,766 wounded. Soviet casualties were given as 9,284 killed and wounded.

With this brief outline of the fighting at Nomonhan/Khalkhin Gol as background, a detailed examination of the action of the Imperial Japanese Army's 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, will

illustrate the types of problems and the difficulties Japanese infantry encountered when fighting the Soviets. It will also illuminate Japanese and Soviet small unit tactics and doctrine of that period and give the reader the opportunity to gain an appreciation of why an outnumbered and weary Japanese battalion continued to fight against enormous odds.