Originally, Manstein was promised four *panzer* divisions. Due to German reluctance to weaken certain sectors by redeploying German units, the task of opening a corridor to the German [6th Army](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/6th_Army_(Wehrmacht)) fell to the 4th Panzer Army. The German force was pitted against several Soviet armies tasked with the destruction of the encircled German forces and their offensive around the lower [Chir River](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chir_River" \o "Chir River).

The German offensive caught the Red Army by surprise and made large gains on the first day. The spearhead forces enjoyed air support and were able to defeat counterattacks by Soviet troops. By 13 December, Soviet resistance slowed the German advance considerably. Although German forces took the area surrounding Verkhne-Kumskiy, the Red Army launched [Operation Little Saturn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Little_Saturn) on 16 December. Operation Little Saturn crushed the Italian [8th Army](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_participation_in_the_Eastern_Front#The_Italian_8th_Army_or_Italian_Army_in_Russia) on Army Group Don's left flank, threatening the survival of Manstein's entire group of forces. As resistance and casualties increased, Manstein appealed to Hitler and to the commander of the German 6th Army, General [Friedrich Paulus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_Paulus), to allow the 6th Army to break out of Stalingrad; both refused. The 4th Panzer Army continued its attempt to open a corridor to the 6th Army on 18–19 December, but was unable to do so without the aid of forces inside the Stalingrad pocket. Manstein was forced to call off the assault on 23 December and by Christmas Eve the 4th Panzer Army began to withdraw to its starting position. Due to the failure of the 6th Army to breakout and the attempt to break the Soviet encirclement, the Red Army was able to continue the strangulation of German forces in Stalingrad.