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NARVA 1944:

THE WAFFEN-SS AND
THE BATTLE FOR EUROPE

Richard
Landwehr



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**NARVA 1944: THE WAFFEN-SS
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NARVA 1944: THE WAFFEN-SS AND THE BATTLE FOR EUROPE

Richard Landwehr

**Illustrated by
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This book is respectfully dedicated to the soldiers
of the III. SS Panzer Corps (Germanic), living and
dead. You will not be forgotten!

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NOTE TO THE READER

The reader will notice that the place names in Estonia and Latvia appear in Estonian, Latvian, English, and German. This was due to the fact that the author used these spellings from the original research material when writing the book. Due to the time delay that would result to correct the spellings of the place names the publisher chose to rectify this in a second printing of *NARVA 1944* rather than delay the first edition which would mean a delay of at least two or three months.

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FOREWORD

The Meaning of Narva

"Now, after our many withdrawals and the shortening of our front, Narva had once again become the gateway between Europe and the East, just as it had been seven hundred years before. In dugouts and trenches, in pillboxes and out in no-man's land, men from all the northern countries, now in the ranks of the Waffen-SS, were fighting side by side with Estonian volunteers again for the survival of Europe. Thus Narva remained, right into our own troubled times, what it had been for centuries past, the key to northern Europe. Here the future of our continent would be decided. This was the dividing line of the world." Erich Kern in *The Dance of Death*, p. 176.

Narva, Estonia, is barely a dot on the map, yet for much of the year 1944, it stood for so much more. For there, grouped in the town and along the river that both bore the name Narva, a unique international armed force stood its ground against a barbarous foe. They were soldiers of the Waffen-SS, the elite assault force of the German Army, yet on their sleeves they bore the colors of Denmark and Norway, Sweden and Finland, Holland and Belgium, Flanders and Estonia. They served in divisions named "Nordland," "Nederland" and "Estonian" and regiments and brigades titled "Danmark," "Norge," "De Ruyter," "General Seyffardt," "Wallonien" and "Langemarck." They spoke different languages but they shared a common commitment: a love of their continent and a hatred of communism and international capitalism. Motivated by the call of conscience, they chose voluntarily to do battle against these predatory enemies.

This book is the story of the European volunteers that fought at Narva in the ranks of the Waffen-SS. It is a story that has virtually been blacked out in the West, and has never appeared in detail in the English language before. It is useless to ask why this is the case. Perhaps someone is afraid that in telling the tale a whole mountain of anti-German propaganda fabrication may

begin to totter precariously. For instance, the "establishment" (for want of a better term), keeps telling us that the soldiers of the Waffen-SS were "criminals," that they were recruited from international gutter-sweepings, and that they committed numerous "atrocities." Actually, this is a pretty accurate assessment of the Allied sponsored so-called "resistance movement!" Most volunteers in the Waffen-SS actually came from the best human elements in their respective countries and they served with honor, decency, idealism and most of all, indefatigable courage. Quite a contrast to the Allied and Communist terror bands that preyed on the innocent people of Europe from the cesspools of the underworld!

"By 1945, the Waffen-SS had proved by its combat success that European people could exist together, but as long as they recognized and accepted the national differences between one another. It had been in the Waffen-SS that, for the first time, Dutch had been commanded by Germans and Germans by Belgians. It was this idealism, dearly bought on the roads of Russia and later in its slave labor camps, that created an outstanding spirit of comradeship and combatant ability among all members, regardless of nationality or rank.

"The greatest triumph of the Waffen-SS, though, was not on the field of battle. It was in its policy of recruiting non-German volunteers, not as hired mercenaries, but as co-fighters for a European ideal." Beadle and Hartmann in *The Waffen-SS: Its Divisional Insignia*.

Better than anything else, Narva symbolized the European Volunteer Movement of the Waffen-SS, so for the first time the incredible story of the Narva "front fighters" is being made available in English. It should be noted as well, that despite enormous numerical and material advantages of the U.S. supplied Soviet enemy, the Waffen-SS volunteers on the Narva Front were never defeated on the battlefield. Events beyond their control would eventually decide their destiny.

In February 1944, at the same time as the Narva battle was developing, another event took place in the south Ukraine near Cherkassy that formed another epic chapter in the history of the European Volunteer Movement. There, soldiers from more than a dozen countries who served with the 5th SS Panzer Division "Wiking" and the 5th SS Volunteer Stormbrigade "Wal-lonien," had escaped from a communist trap in a battle of heroic dimensions. One of the soldiers that fought there, a great

man in his own right, was SS-Hauptsturmfuehrer (later SS-Standartenfuehrer), Leon Degrelle. He would later play an important part in the struggle for the Narva sector. On the 30th anniversary of the Cherkassy breakout, Degrelle wrote the following tribute. Although the battle of Narva is not specifically mentioned, the message certainly applies to that struggle as well:

"It is now 30 years since we fought side by side in Cherkassy; German comrades, comrades from Holland, Flanders, Denmark, Norway, the Baltic and we, the French-speaking Germanic Wallonian comrades. We gave our blood — thousand among us gave their lives — in the service of a great cause. In this bloody battle we fought for the true Europe, the Europe of 2,000 years of culture. On the snowfields of Cherkassy we defended a great past and the construction of the future.

"Our sacrifices and our dead have not immediately brought about victory. But I believe that our Europe was the *true* Europe, it was not the Europe of the pitiful manipulators who put material interests above the public good; nor that of the clique of egotistical, petty politicians and their miserable avaricious associates.

"Our Europe was the Europe of high ideals and beliefs, held as a common bond. People did not die for a useless cause; they gave their youth and their lives to bring about a work of good. Our Europe was a Europe led by a strong hand, a Europe all encompassing and large, from the end of the steppes to the Atlantic, supported by an immense healthy force, the force of the Waffen-SS; youth from 28 European countries, one and another welded together, in the strength of a million, disciplined and with purpose, determined to accomplish their common goals.

"This Europe had a soul, a meaning, it possessed then the only real, effective unity: that which is derived from devout faith. This was supported emphatically by the reality of our arms, our 'troop,' our ideals and our iron will, giving us the sure ability to endure any difficulties.

"Sooner or later, this strong, idealistic Europe, as opposed to the Europe of the small-time politicians and manipulators, will become a reality. We believe this day will be coming soon comrades, and we have proven by our actions at Cherkassy and in the whole period of the great

struggles of the Eastern Front, that some of the credit belongs to us!"

—Leon Degrelle, commander of the 28th SS Volunteer Panzer Grenadier Division "Wallonien" and bearer of the Oakleaves to the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross

CHAPTER I

On the Oranienbaum Front

In early December 1943, the III. SS Germanic Panzer Corps was en route from Croatia to the frozen shore of the Gulf of Finland near Leningrad. In Croatia the soldiers of the III. SS Corps had gone through a series of savage — and hair-raising — "toughening up" encounters with the communist terrorist bands led by Tito. These were experiences that no one would soon forget, particularly the week long successful struggle for survival by the encircled I. Battalion/SS Regiment 24 "Danmark" at Glina and the subsequent massacre of captured soldiers from 5th Company/"Danmark" at Hrastovica. The sight of the 15 dead Danish volunteers who had been tortured to death mutilated and dumped in the town square at Hrastovica, was indelibly imprinted into the memories of the Waffen-SS troopers. They now knew first-hand the unlimited savagery that the bestial enemy was capable of and they knew what they were fighting for.

The strengths of the components of III. SS Corps as they took up their new assignments on the Eastern Front were as follows:

11th SS Volunteer Panzer-Grenadier Division "Nordland": 11,400 soldiers of all ranks including 1,400 Danes, 550 Norwegians, 45 Swedes and an undetermined number of Finns, Belgians and Dutchmen.

4th SS Assault Brigade "Nederland": 6,000 soldiers of all ranks including 3,000 Dutch volunteers and 20 Belgians with the remainder being mostly ethnic-Germans from Romania and Hungary.

III. SS Corps Staff Elements:

2,500 troops of various nationalities serving in the different speciality troops attached to the Corps' HQ.

"Nederland" still did not have its heavy weapons companies or its artillery detachment (battalion strength) attached to it as these elements were still in training at the SS artillery training grounds at Beneschau near Prague. "Nordland" was missing its Flak detachment (anti-aircraft guns) which was still in forma-

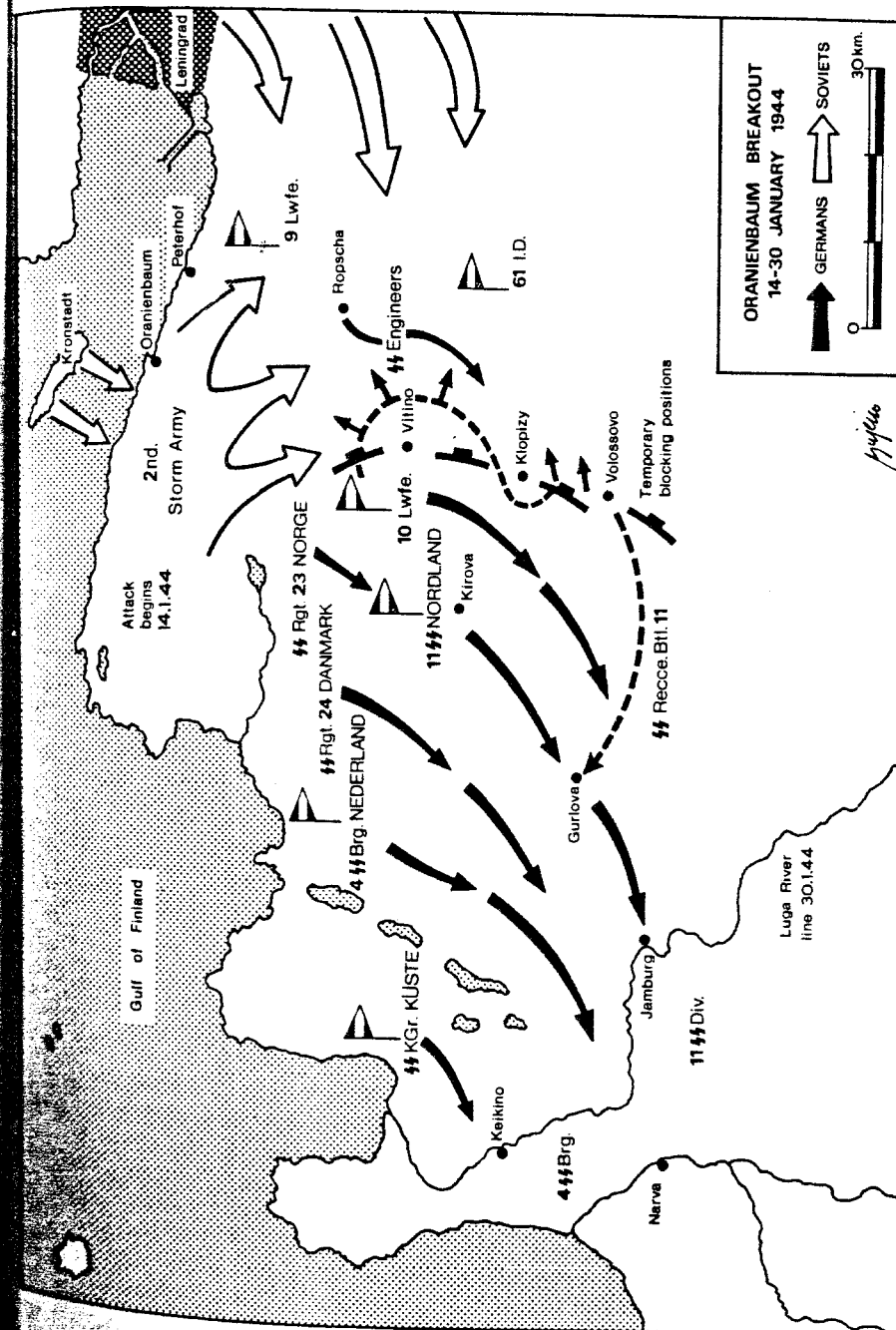
tion in Ayr, East Prussia, and its Panzer detachment was still in need of its allocation of Pz V model "Panther" tanks.

III. SS Corps was being transferred into the jurisdiction of Generaloberst (Col. Gen.) Lindemann's 18th Army which maintained the Leningrad sector of Army Group North on the Eastern Front. Specifically, the Corps was to go into defensive positions around the Oranienbaum Pocket, which was a dangerous Soviet beach-head on the coast of the Gulf of Finland behind the German lines to the west of Leningrad. The primary defensive force in the area was the extremely weak III. Luftwaffe Field Corps under Generalleutnant (Lt. Gen.) Oldebracht, consisting of the 9th and 10th Luftwaffe Field Divisions. These were relatively poor quality units composed of former airmen who had been converted into infantry.

On 5 December 1943, the various staff portions of III. SS Corps arrived at their designated headquarters in Klopitzky to the south of the Oranienbaum Pocket. On the next day, the combat engineer sections of the "Nordland" Division (16 Co./ "Danmark," 16 Co./ "Norge" and SS Engineer Battalion 11), arrived from their training camp near Beneschau in Bohemia-Moravia. It was the job of the engineers to prepare the frontline bunker positions and fortifications for the rest of the Corps' units. They immediately began work at this task with the assistance of their counterparts from 10th Luftwaffe Division. One important part of their job was to lay out the minefields that were a mainstay of the lightly held front lines.

Soon afterwards the SS Regiments "Norge" and "Danmark" reached the terminating points of their railroad lines and began motorized truck "marches" to their new front sector. 18th Army had decided to deploy most of the III. SS Corps along the western side of the Oranienbaum Pocket to protect the withdrawal routes to Estonia when the anticipated major Soviet breakout attempt took place. Under the code name "Operation Luetzow," the Waffen-SS units were integrated into the front lines, with the battalions of Division "Nordland" assuming their initial positions by 10 December. At exactly midnight on 13 December, III. SS Corps was officially activated for duty on the Oranienbaum Front. With an enemy offensive expected, the Corps' troops worked intensively at developing the fortifications along the main battle line.

"Nordland" was given an 18 mile front sector to defend that ran from Gorbovizy in the west to Novaja-Borja in the east.



With drawal route of III. SS Panzer Corps units during the "breakout" from the Oranienbaum pocket. (Chapters 1 through 3.)

Regiment "Danmark" was deployed on the western flank and "Norge" was put in place on the eastern flank. "Nordland's" command post was situated directly behind the middle of the lines in the village of Kirova. On "Nordland's" right, the 10th Luftwaffe Division held down a 17 mile front sector running to Petrovskaja where the 9th Luftwaffe Division took over and maintained the final 11 miles to the shore of the Gulf of Finland.

On "Nordland's" left was a mixed battle-group centered around elements from the 4th SS Police Division. This "Polizei" task force was composed of 6,400 troops and included Estonian police companies, coastal artillery batteries and stray veterinary and convalescent platoons. It held a 10 mile frontage segment that contained the northwest corner of the Oranienbaum Pocket and ended at Kernova on the Gulf of Finland. III. SS Corps commander, Gruppenfuehrer (Gruf.) Steiner decided to entrust this weak sector to the SS Assault Brigade "Nederland" when it arrived. The displaced soldiers would then be available for rear area guard duty farther to the west.

To defend the long coastline that ran from the mouth of the Narva River at Hungerburg in Estonia to the western outskirts of Kernova, Gruf. Steiner set up an independent command group. His choice to take charge of this formation (dubbed Kampfgruppe "Kueste" or Battle-group Coast), was the fifty-two year old Danish Brigadefuehrer (Brigfhr.) Christian Poul Kryssing, the chief of III. SS Corps' Artillery. Kryssing's chief-of-staff was another Dane, Sturmbannfuehrer (Stubaf.) Paul Raznow Englehardt. Spare officers from various units of III. SS Corps were used to construct a staff for the Kampfgruppe (KGr.).

The central core of KGr. "Kueste" was its coastal artillery under the command of Major Blum. Batteries were situated at key points along the coast. Beyond that, the units deployed, from west-to-east included: an Estonian police battalion at Merekula, 2 convalescent companies in Hungerburg with 3 veterinary companies to the northeast of the city; 2 more convalescent companies were stationed at Kirjamo, six miles west of Ostroff. Ostroff was situated between two peninsulas referred to as the "left breast" and the "right breast" due to their shape. On the "left breast" was a disinfection company that specialized in delousing soldiers bound for home. At the mouth of the Luga River was the Naval Infantry Regiment "Von Beckerath"

with its staff in East Luga. West of Vilikino was an engineer battalion and mobile artillery detachment. On the west side of the "right breast" were three divisional replacement battalions and an NCO school. On the north and east sides of the "right breast" were the Naval Infantry Battalions "Hohnschild" and "Schneider." These adjoined a task force from the 4th SS Police Division near Kernova. This element was soon detached from KGr. "Kueste" and the 5,000 SS troops that comprised it were sent south to the Volkhov Front.

The equipment for KGr. "Kueste" came from all of the weapons arsenals in Europe. The 7.5 and 15 cm caliber artillery batteries were of French, Polish and Czech manufacture as were most of the hand-held weapons. The 9,000 men that composed the battle-group were almost as mixed in their unit composition. The only reserve element established for KGr. "Kueste" was a veterinary company at Velikino.

On 28 December 1943, the first elements of Brigade "Nederland" arrived from Croatia. One day later, II. Battalion/SS Rgt. 49 "De Ruyter" moved into the front lines and the SS Police Division battle-group began pulling out. Of the former occupants of the sector only the artillery detachment of the SS Police Group (III./SS Art.Rgt. 4), stayed in place since "Nederland" was still without its own artillery. The command post of the Brigade was placed in Lutschki, while SS Rgt. 49 "De Ruyter" took over the eastern part of the sector and SS Rgt. 48 "General Seyffardt" assumed the western segment.

"Nederland" was still far from being fully equipped and its vital anti-tank detachment (SS Panzerjaeger Abteilung 54) was left to wait at Kotly in the rear area for the arrival of its consignment of self-propelled guns (artillery pieces mounted on tank chassis), and anti-tank guns. Kotly was also the billet for the anti-partisan unit for KGr. "Kueste" led by Stubaf. Schock.

With "Nordland" firmly in position along the entire middle sector of the Oranienbaum Pocket, the Divisional staff took up residence in an old Ducal castle at Kirova, behind the center of the lines. Attached to the staff was the 1st Company of the "Nordland" maintenance detachment under Hauptsturmfuehrer Christiansen, which was responsible for repairing the Division's motor vehicles. On the first night in Kirova, the "Nordland" staff members were subjected to a Soviet night bombing mission that sent everyone out of the buildings and scurrying for the safety of underground bunkers.

SS Rgt. 24 "Danmark" was now fully employed on the western part of the Divisional sector. The regiment's command post was located in a bunker complex north of the town of Saoserje. A log "corduroy" road linked it with the headquarters of the SS Artillery Regiment 11 to the south near Kaporje-Ropscha. In the front lines, III. Btl./"Danmark" constituted the Regimental left wing and held down a 2 mile section running from Petrovizy to Gorbovizy where contact was maintained with Brigade "Nederland." The battalion HQ was located 1 mile behind the lines at Kastivskoje. I./"Danmark" held the right wing of the Regimental front with its lines extending east to a point just west of Voronino. II. Battalion was kept in reserve to the south of the main front. The batteries of II. Detachment/SS Art. Rgt. 11 were assigned to provide fire support for Regiment "Danmark."

SS Rgt. 23 "Norge" held the line from Voronino to Novaja-Burja, with II./"Norge" to the west and III./"Norge" to the east. I. Battalion was kept in reserve at Lopuschinka and the Regimental HQ was in a bunker complex near Dolgaja-Niva. Supporting units attached to "Norge" were the I./SS Art. Rgt. 11 and the 2nd Co./SS Engineer Btl. 11; both were also located around Dolgaja-Niva. With the arrival of Brigade "Nederland," the commander of Rgt. "Norge," Obersturmbannfuehrer (Ostuf.) Wolfgang Joerchel was placed in charge of SS Rgt. 48 "GS" and was replaced at the helm of "Norge" by Stubaf. Arnold Stoffers.

On 29 December, the highly mobile Armored Reconnaissance Detachment "Nordland" (SS Panzer Aufklaerungs Abteilung 11), took up positions in the vicinity of Begunizy-Greblovo to await final deployment orders. This unit consisted of 5 companies of armored cars, armored troop carriers, weapon mounted vehicles and scout cars. It had excellent range and fire-power and was commanded by Hstuf. Rudolf Saalbach. Far to the west, at Jamburg on the Luga River, the SS Anti-tank Detachment 11 (SS Panzerjaeger Abteilung 11) assembled. It consisted of 3 batteries (companies) of assault guns. At this time the unit was still undergoing weapons training, so it was stationed well behind the lines. The commander was Hstuf. Roensch advised by the Army Hauptmann (Captain) Schultz-Streek.

At the end of the year, the SS Panzer (Tank) Detachment 11 (later given the honorary title "Hermann von Salza"), was assembled at Hungerburg and then sent to the Jamburg area for



Danish Brigadefuehrer Christian Peder Kryssing, commander of SS Kampfgruppe "Kueste."

deployment in the "Panther Positions." The "Panther Positions" were the heavily fortified German secondary defenses designed to hold as a breakwater against an enemy breakthrough. These were often small fortresses placed behind key points in the main line that frequently relied on partially disabled, entrenched tanks to give them fire power. "Nordland's" Panzer Detachment constituted an emergency mobile reserve that would provide back-up support for the "Panther Positions" in case of enemy penetration through the front lines. At Hungerburg, the SS Pz. Detachment 11 also received its first low-profile "Panther" tanks which were vastly superior to the sub-standard armored vehicles that had been in use to that point.

The battlefield situation on the Oranienbaum Front could be described as quiet with only random rifle fire occasionally being

exchanged. Knowing that they were now up against a large number of non-Germans, the Russians made some crude attempts at propaganda warfare. One morning, soldiers from 16th Co./"Danmark" found that during the night a communist raiding party had festooned the nearby trees with posters urging the Danes to desert. On 1 January 1944 a significant increase in Soviet air reconnaissance was noted. Feeling uneasy, the commander of "Danmark," Ostubaf. Graf von Westphalen ordered the assembly of a raiding party to bring back some enemy prisoners for interrogation. Oberscharfuehrer (Oscha.) Hvenekilde was personally selected by Westphalen to lead the mission. Unfortunately the operation proved to be a miserable failure since neither Hvenekilde or his men ever returned to the German lines; they all wound up in Soviet hands.

Despite this setback, the obvious signs of increased enemy activity pointed directly to an early Red Army offensive and efforts were made to bolster vulnerable spots in the front lines. On the night of 10/11 January, Obersturmfuehrer (Ostuf.) Knepel's 2nd Company from SS Engineer Battalion 11 marched through the heavy snowfields to assume new positions in the woods behind the juncture of the 9th and 10th Luftwaffe Field Divisions.

The "seams" that marked the boundaries between major units were usually troubled spots since command jurisdiction at such locations was often ill-defined and this knowledge was taken advantage of by an alert adversary. Hence the dispatch of the SS combat engineers to the Luftwaffe Field Corps' combat zone. They would hopefully provide the necessary overlap to prevent any significant penetration in this hazy area.

The Soviet garrison within the Oranienbaum Pocket was growing at an alarming rate via shipments of troops and material from the offshore island of Kronstadt. The Germans lacked the air and naval strength to disrupt this buildup. But the communists were not hindered by any such restraints. Each month they received more new airplanes from the United States than the German Luftwaffe had available for the entire Eastern Front. As a result the Soviets were able to carry out constant air raids on the cities and towns in the German held areas. The anti-aircraft Flak gunners of III. SS Corps were able to do an adequate job of protecting the main roads, but for every plane downed the Russians had two or three replacements and they cared nothing about their losses.

III. SS Corps staff took a realistic view of the situation. They knew that they were outnumbered and outgunned by the enemy. Gruf. Steiner was prepared to undertake a prompt, tactical withdrawal if necessary to compensate for the increasing disparity in strength between the two sides. Flexibility would be the key to survival in the struggle to contain the Red Army and III. SS Corps had the officers and NCOs with the courage and initiative to do the job.



SS-Gruppenfuehrer Mattias Kleinheisterkamp, temporary commander of III. SS Panzer Corps, spring 1944.

CHAPTER II

Red Offensive

The great Russian onslaught on the Leningrad Front of 18th Army came with the suddenness of a blizzard on 14 January 1944. 6 Soviet Armies outnumbering the German forces in personnel by a ratio of 4 to 1, participated in the offensive under the aegis of the "2nd Baltic Front." The breakout attack from the Oranienbaum Pocket was led by the 2nd Storm Army consisting of 2 Corps with 9 Guards Divisions, 3 Tank Brigades, and 1 Coastal Brigade. The full weight of the assault fell on the 9th Luftwaffe Field Division on the east end of the salient. Within a few days, the main body of 9th Luftwaffe Division along with parts of the 126th and 170th Infantry Divisions would be cut-off and encircled. Remnants of the 9th Luftwaffe Division were able to escape from the Soviets but they fell into such a wild retreat that it was many days before they could again be judged combat worthy.

Within a few hours of the beginning of the attack a major, unrepairable breakthrough had been made in the northern wing of 18th Army. Farther to the south, Feldmarschall (Field Marshal) von Kuechler overreacted and hastily ordered a withdrawal to the Luga River — a move that put all of III. SS Panzer Corps in immediate jeopardy. Furious, Adolf Hitler immediately sacked von Kuechler and replaced him with the competent Generaloberst Model, although there was now no alternative but to continue the withdrawal.

It was the 2nd Co./SS Engineer Btl. 11, stationed at the boundary between 9th and 10th Luftwaffe Divisions, that was the first unit of III. SS Corps to confront the enemy. The men of the company were deployed in separate groups in fortified "Finnish Positions" modeled after Finnish Army defenses used in the 1939-40 Winter War. The "Finnish Positions" were so situated as to give a relatively small force the maximum opportunity to intercept and ambush enemy intruders. They did not offer good protection against heavy weapons fire however. At exactly 0600 the SS engineers found themselves under an intensive artillery bombardment from guns of all calibers — the prelude to an enemy assault. An attempt by the commander,

RED OFFENSIVE

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Ostuf. Knepel, to bring his whole company to a predesignated collecting point was unsuccessful as most of the troops were tied down by the enemy fire.

After a short time, the front positions and the surrounding woods had been reduced to a shuddersome sight. Bunkers had been pounded flat into the earth by heavy naval guns firing from ships in the Gulf of Finland. Trees had been torn to jagged splinters that were no more than 6 or 7 feet in height. For many soldiers this first bombardment had been a terrifying, nerve-racking experience. Ostuf. Knepel and his staff hurried to try and regroup the company. Many of the men had lapsed into an apathetic daze from shell-shock, while the cries of the badly wounded echoed throughout the shattered forest. Laboriously, the wounded had to be extricated from the rubble and carried back to the rear.

Soon afterwards, all those who remained in place had to face the first Russians, who came forward into the wooded area dressed in white winter clothing. Little by little the weapons of the nearby Luftwaffe Field soldiers fell silent, but Ostuf. Knepel and his men kept up a spirited resistance, battling with hand grenades and machine-pistols in a wild firefight at close range. But when it became apparent that the Luftwaffe Field positions had been vacated, Knepel was compelled to order a pullback. Actually it was already too late for that. Thanks to the fleeing Luftwaffe soldiers the Russian penetration had grown to a depth of 1½ miles and a width of 3 miles.

The bulk of 2./SS Eng.Btl.11 was now on its own without any neighboring units to rely on for support. The company's right wing had become hopelessly entangled in wicked close combat and before long, all of 2nd Company became surrounded. A radio distress call went out. Fortunately, 3./SS Eng.Btl.11 had already been in motion and under the decisive leadership of Hstuf. Voss, responded promptly to the emergency. Voss ordered a heavy fire poured into the enemy concentrations, then he personally led an infantry charge into their midst. With a supreme effort the men of 3rd Co. broke through to their comrades. Both companies then retreated out of the woods to the southeast and took up positions on higher ground. During the breakout, Ostuf. Knepel, at the head of 2nd Co., was wounded. In the course of the day his company absorbed 100 casualties alone, a heavy price indeed.

With the collapse of the Luftwaffe Field units, the rest of

"Nordland's" engineer battalion led by Stubaf. Fritz Bunse, moved up to try and fill in the gap. The engineers rapidly built a small, log-protected position behind the old lines and awaited the enemy. They did not have a long wait; the Reds were soon on the scene in force and quickly began a series of sharp, mass attacks each of which was resolutely repulsed by the entrenched SS engineers. The fire from Bunse's men was so accurate that the enemy was forced to fall back again and again. But in the afternoon the weather changed, and blowing, drifting snow began to shield the communist movements. The task of the defenders had become much more difficult.

At 1600, as dusk settled in, the Soviets attacked with renewed vigor. The valiant engineers did not weaken; the attacking enemy battalion bled to death before their positions. On the next day rocket-mortar shells from the dreaded "Stalin Organs" (Katushya Rockets), rained down on the SS men. Swarms of Soviet planes flew over and began a ferocious bombardment. The enemy artillery found the range of the engineer battalion's positions and intensified its fire. Then it slacked off abruptly. The old hands knew what that meant: an infantry attack was imminent. Three lumbering T-34 tanks suddenly hove into view and behind them came swarms of Red Army infantrymen. Blazing away, the tanks crawled right up to the SS trenches, but they had underestimated their adversaries. Three brave engineers sprang out of the snow drifts and attached satchel charges to the armor-plated behemoths. Within moments the tanks were blown to shreds in terrific explosions. This brought the infantry advance to a standstill, as the soldiers hesitated to advance further. Stubaf. Bunse had prepared well for this contingency; he had positioned machine-gun teams and sharpshooters in disguised snow banks and tree clumps. Now they opened up with everything they had at the enemy at close range. It was a slaughter; the surviving Russians flew back in a wild panic. SS Engineer Battalion 11 had done its job.

In the meantime, other German units were having trouble trying to halt the Soviet offensive. III. SS Corps was hurriedly juggling its troops about to make the strongest forces available to block off the western prong of the Russian penetration. On the morning of 14 January, the central path of the Soviet attack led directly towards the location of the SS Armored Reconnaissance Detachment 11 (hereafter referred to as SS Recce Btl. 11), near Kljassina. En route, a command post from a bat-

talion in the crumbling 10th Luftwaffe Division was overrun at Djatlezy. SS Recce Btl. 11 now went into action. At noon, in a rapid counterthrust, the armored cars from 2nd Co./SS Recce Btl. 11 retook Djatlezy from the Reds. No sooner had they done so then the enemy rained down rocket mortars on the recaptured log houses, causing one fatality among the platoon leaders. Nearby another Soviet element had reached the main road to Voronino near Alt-Bor and the commander of 2./SS Recce Btl. 11, Ostuf. Heckmueller, relocated his troops to meet the new threat. At Alt-Bor, 2nd Co. was joined by the men of a "senior" work battalion (all personnel were over the age of 50), and together they were able to block off the communists until 21 January.

On the morning of 14 January 1944, the I. Battalion/SS "Norge" was stationed at Lopuschinka, 6½ miles behind the front, where it served as Corps' reserve. At noon the battalion received orders to intercept the Soviet breakthrough force. Using darkness for cover, I./"Norge" moved out in a motor convoy during the night for designated attack positions in the area west of Ropscha. The battalion commander, Hstuf. Fritz Vogt, was a very cautious officer who had been awarded the prestigious Knight's Cross decoration early in the war during the Western Campaign of 1940.

Vogt discussed the confusing situation with his company commanders; no set plans could be formulated, the battalion had to adapt to events as they developed. Reinforcements in the form of a section of mobile assault guns from the SS Anti-Tank Detachment 11/"Nordland" had arrived to support the battalion. On the morning of 15 January, I./SS "Norge" received a very rude greeting from the other side. Six T-34 tanks had suddenly materialized right in front of the battalion's positions and enemy fire was being received from all sides. The SS men struggled to return the fire. Hstuf. von Bargan's 3rd Company was plastered with direct salvos from the T-34s. The self-propelled guns were called up but they weren't ready for action until noon.

Finally, 3./"Norge" and Hstuf. Ellersiek's 3rd Assault Gun Company attempted a counterattack, but the enemy forces proved to be too strong. The command assault gun got caught in a cross fire between the enemy tanks and was soon crippled and burning. Hstuf. Ellersiek and his crew were just able to bail out and escape to the German lines. All were badly burned.

3./"Norge" was driven back to its shallow trench line where it again dug in. The T-34s did not pursue them, but stayed in place shelling the SS positions for the remainder of the day. 3./"Norge" had taken punishing casualties; Hstuf. von Bargan and all of his Norwegian platoon leaders were wounded. Command of the company passed on to an NCO, Hauptscharfuehrer (Hscha.) Twesmann.

Artillery support for I./SS "Norge" came from 5./SS Art. Reg.11/"Nordland," positioned to the northeast of Djatlezy. This battery, under Ostuf. Binnerup, kept up a heavy fire on the enemy for the whole day. The Soviets replied in kind with their dreaded "Stalin Organ" rockets and these inflicted heavy losses on I./"Norge." In the evening the battalion withdrew ½ mile to the southwest to improve its positions.

On 17 January, I./"Norge" was withdrawn and sent to a point north of the main Vitino-Djatlezy highway to again intercept an enemy spearhead. The front was now beginning to swing around towards the west. During I. Battalion's hasty relocation, Hscha. Twesmann was badly wounded by a shrapnel fragment in the lungs and was evacuated to the field hospital at Akjas, being conveyed alternately by sled and boat. The battalion adjutant, Ostuf. Fechner, now took over 3./"Norge." Hstuf. Vogt's battalion remained in its new location until 21 January and it was given support by Army assault guns.

Hour by hour the overall situation grew more critical. Hstuf. Rudolf Saalbach, CO of SS Recce Btl. 11, who had been placed in charge of the Djatlezy sector, made the decision to fall back to a better line of defense to the southwest. He really had no choice in the matter as the Soviets were closing in from three sides. Saalbach's command was bolstered by 1st Co./SS Engineer Btl. 11, which had hurriedly rushed to the sector on 15 January, and by some surviving remnants from the 10th Luftwaffe Field Division. As Saalbach's soldiers moved out, Soviet anti-tank gunners and sharpshooters tried hard to disrupt their movements. But despite these distractions and the cold, wet weather, the SS men successfully occupied a new area and began to construct their bunkers. This was difficult work that was halted on and off during the day by Russian probing attacks and mortar and artillery shelling.

The main objective of 2nd Soviet Storm Army was now to bypass Ropscha and seize instead the main road and rail lines at Gatschina to the south. Until the evening of 17 January, the SS engineer group under Stubaf. Bunse along with the battered 2nd

and 3rd Companies of SS Engineer Btl. 11, had been fighting near Ropscha with elements of the 61st Infantry Division. But on 17 January, the point of the Soviet attack passed to the rear of the engineers and directly menaced the supporting German artillery batteries. Stubaf. Bunse was alert to the danger and he notified his radiomen and transport drivers to prepare to evacuate. At the same time the SS engineer companies assembled for a counterattack.

Bunse began to sense trouble when he learned that the supporting artillerymen had already retreated to avoid being shot to pieces. That meant that a counterattack would have little probability of success. At the last moment the engineers were called out of their battle readiness positions and given their marching orders. The only objective now was to clear out as fast as possible before the enemy ring descended permanently around them.

But the pullout began too late; 61st Infantry Division and Bunse's SS engineers were already cutoff! There was nothing left for the soldiers to do but to fight their way down the road and try and cut their way of the "sack." Simultaneously, the SS Recce Btl. 11, along with troops from 50th Infantry Corps, had gotten caught in a devastating enemy bombardment. Soon afterwards, communist forces infiltrated through the German positions and a situation of utter confusion, not unlike the oft-heralded "fog of war," reigned. Coming to the rescue of the SS Recce Btl. 11 were the soldiers of Bunse's SS Engineer Btl. 11 and the 61st Infantry Division who had battled their way out of one frying pan and into another. Together, the combined SS and Army units were able to disengage and gain a very temporary respite.

III. SS Panzer Corps' HQ followed the movements of its units as best it could, aware that the deep enemy penetrations to the south now threatened all of the Corps' elements which were still trying to maintain a west-to-east defensive line. Gruf. Steiner saw that a radical modification of the front was called for, so he ordered Corps' troops to fall back on a north-to-south axis to prevent an enemy breakthrough to the west. But the new orders proved difficult to implement due to the chaotic combat conditions that prevailed; if the massive Soviet forces continued to move rapidly without regard for their losses, there would be no stopping them whatever new positions were adopted!

On the night of 21/22 January, the last III. SS Corps' reserves

were sent into the loose ring that Corps' HQ was trying to form around the Red Army spearhead. SS Recce Btl. 11 was in constant action trying to keep opposite of its Soviet armored vehicle counterparts that were leading the thrust southwards. On 22 January, the Soviets smashed through some makeshift defenses of 61st Infantry Division and attained the main highway east of Vitino, a vital road and rail junction. The last German unit in the area was 2nd Co./SS Recce Btl. 11. The men of 2nd Company knew they could at best only delay, not stop, the enormous enemy concentration that opposed them, so they kept up a steady fire on the communist lead elements. With great daring, the armored car platoons from 2nd Co. slashed into the enemy infantry, cutting great swaths of death and destruction, but the Reds fought back with heavy mortars that fired a new napalm-like phosphorous shell. 2nd Co. was finally forced to withdraw at 1900 hours, but they had bought enough time to enable other SS units to buildup their defenses at Vitino.

The job of holding the town of Vitino fell to I. Battalion/SS Regiment 48 "General Seyffardt"/"Nederland," commanded by the thoroughly competent and brave Hstuf. Ruehle von Lilienstern. Along with two supporting companies from SS Engineer Battalion 54/"Nederland," I./SS "GS" took up forward blocking positions around the eastern perimeter of Vitino. During the night of 22/23 January, the Soviets attacked Vitino repeatedly. In extremely violent action, each enemy assault wave was thrown back by the Dutch SS men. But von Lilienstern was not content to sit back and wait for the Reds to make their next move. He personally led 17 counterattacks against the communist forces, each of which was repulsed in bitter fighting. Von Lilienstern finally fell badly wounded, but he insisted upon remaining up front with his troops, directing their actions. When the crisis had passed, Hstuf. von Lilienstern was transported to the Corps' rear area hospital in Jamburg. For his personal valor in the successful defense of Vitino he was awarded the Knight's Cross by Adolf Hitler.

By 23 January the course of the Oranienbaum Front had been dramatically altered. The western sector remained intact but the eastern sector now began around Kaploscha-Djatlezy where I./SS "Danmark" was still holding on. From there the lines angled off sharply to the south. Due south of Djatlezy was the Kampfgruppe "Helling" composed of survivors from 10th Luftwaffe Division and the 1st Co./SS Engineer Btl. 11.

In the area north of Vitino was I./SS "Norge" with I./SS "General Seyffardt" still in place at Vitino. To the south of the Vitino highway were battle-groups from SS Recce Btl. 11 and the 61st Infantry Division — they confronted the major thrust of the Soviet advance. Streaming into these hastily occupied positions were the battered remnants of German divisions that had been shattered on the Leningrad Front.

Heavy fighting raged on the "breakthrough" front on 23 January. The Soviets especially zeroed in on the positions of I./"Danmark" in the Djatlezy sector, with the aim of seizing the branch roads that lead to Voronino, Bor and Tschermyskino. Backed by large tank, artillery and rocket-mortar detachments, the communist attack pushed forward slowly, inexorably gaining ground. I./"Danmark" struggled stubbornly to keep the enemy back and was successful for a time in doing so, albeit at a very high cost in casualties.

In the south, the Soviets had been unable to batter their way through the new positions of 61st Infantry Division and SS Recce Btl. 11, so they simply kept driving further south until an outflanking operation to the west could begin. At Chulgusi, south of the Vitino highway, the Reds found the weak spot they were looking for and they tore a huge gap in the German lines. SS Recce Btl. 11 received a rather blunt order from Corps' HQ: retake Chulgusi!

Immediately, Hstuf. Saalbach made his preparations. He divided his detachment into two combat groups: Group North consisting of 1st, 4th and 5th Companies, led personally by Saalbach, and Group South with 2nd and 3rd Companies under Ostuf. Heckmueller. After assembling in Torrossovo, the two groups began their mission. Group South was the first to make contact with the enemy and its attack quickly bogged down in a sharp fire-fight. But Group North was now able to catch the Soviet flanks and rear by surprise. The enemy elements at Chulgusi were soon routed and fled wildly into the woods to the east. Losses to SS Recce Btl. 11 had been light: 2nd Co. had lost a scout car and the commander of 5th Co., Ostuf. Schmidt, had been wounded.

On 24 January, the Russians paused to regroup their battered vanguards and the front lines were relatively calm. The "Nordland" Divisional staff used this respite to begin a partial pull-back of non-combat elements. Long truck convoys began to move the support personnel and their equipment to the rear

area in the west. The signals and maintenance companies were routed to Jamburg where they would again open up shop. The next day the stability of the front was shattered by massive enemy attacks. I.Btl./"Danmark," under extreme pressure, was forced to withdraw from the Djatlezy sector. Losses were overwhelming. The battalion commander, Hstuf. Wichmann, and two of his company commanders, Hstuf. Hennicke and Ostuf. Hein (both veterans of the Danish Freikorps; an earlier SS volunteer legion), were killed. The Danish Hstuf. Per Sorensen took over the reins of the battalion just as it was being closed in on three sides by the surging enemy.

Hstuf. Sorensen assembled his troops and gave them their instructions: "We're breaking out to the southwest — to Vitino!" Sorensen personally led the point of the breakout company while Ostuf. Sidon and his company brought up the rear. After a rambling, costly retreat through thick, snow-filled forests, I./"Danmark" finally reached Vitino where it linked up with I./"General Seyffardt." The Danish volunteers were thrown into hastily organized defensive positions to the south of the town.

After a conference between the commanders of the Dutch and Danish SS battalions, the decision was made to withdraw from Vitino on 27 January when the code word "Thaw" was given. 1st and 3rd Companies from I./"Danmark" led by the reliable Ostuf. Sidon would cover the retreat. With the Soviets moving freely to the north and the south, there were no qualms about abandoning Vitino. The only question that remained to be answered was: Could the pull back be carried out in time?

CHAPTER III

Retreat From the Oranienbaum Front

On 25 January 1944, the Kampfgruppe "Helling" (survivors of 10th Luftwaffe Division plus 1st Co./SS Engineer Btl. 11), became surrounded. A briefing was held for the officers and the decision was made to attempt a breakout in the late afternoon. The SS engineers, led by their commander Untersturmfuehrer (Ustuf.) Arera, would be in the lead. At dusk, the withdrawal effort got underway. The foot columns, protected by riflemen on the flanks, travelled through the woods to the southwest. The covering parties occasionally skirmished with the enemy and some casualties were taken, but the march continued, somewhat impeded by the high snow drifts.

As night fell, the retreating soldiers found themselves in a precarious situation. They could not be certain of the enemy's whereabouts. After burying two dead and tending the wounded, Kampfgruppe "Heller" marched on and luckily stumbled into a fortified German outpost. From there they could continue on to the west in relative safety.

During the afternoon of 25 January, SS Recce Btl. 11 was put on alert in positions that formed a half-circle to the east of the town of Gubanizy. Enemy tank motors could be heard in the distance, and it was felt that another big attack was imminent. A small part of the battalion was sent into Gubanizy itself. In the early morning hours of 26 January, Soviet tanks and attached infantry penetrated Gubanizy from the north, having moved through the now evacuated positions of Kampfgruppe "Helling." Using the cover of darkness effectively, the Reds rammed into a column of parked German vehicles from SS Recce Btl. 11, but actually only seriously damaged one armored scout car.

The information about the Soviet incursion was radioed to Hstuf. Saalbach at the Recce Btl. HQ. At dawn, he ordered his entire unit to advance on Gubanizy. As they drew nearer, the situation looked more and more ominous. 61 enemy tanks had now entered the town. But there could be no turning back; audacity would have to carry the day. Hstuf. Saalbach waved his column of armored gun vehicles forward into the attack.

Of the first group of 7 enemy tanks encountered, 6 were quickly destroyed by the SS gunners. Then a horrifying, close-quarters armored battle ensued. The participants completely lost track of time and feeling; the deafening din of the battle created a sort of mesmerizing numbness. Only one thing counted: hit the enemy tanks. Due to the heavy armor plating on the Russian vehicles it often took several shells to immobilize them. When the shooting finally stopped, Gubanizy was littered with the smoldering hulks of 48 Soviet tanks. 11 of the kills belonged to the audacious Dutch volunteer, Casper Sporck, who had driven his assault gun right into the enemy midst. 13 of the enemy armored vehicles had escaped, some of them damaged. SS Recce Btl. 11 had no casualties!

Immediately afterwards, part of the Recce Btl. was dispatched to the vital railroad town of Volossovo to the south, where a battle-group from the 227th Infantry Division was struggling to hold on. On the morning of 27 January, the enemy launched an armored assault against the entire front from Gubanizy to Volossovo, but the German positions held. Still, everyone knew that the weakened troops could not hold out for another such day. Therefore, under cover of darkness, the German forces began retreating. 5th Co./SS Recce Btl. 11 provided protective cover for the general withdrawal. At the Volossovo railroad station, the "softskin" vehicles of SS Recce Btl. 11 were loaded on flatcars for shipment to Narva, far to the west; they would only be a hindrance in the fighting that lay ahead.

Up until 26 January, III. SS Panzer Corps had been continually adjusting its positions to block the attacking enemy and also facilitate the pullback of the divisions from the northern wing of 18th Army. The units on the Leningrad Front had lost devastating amounts of men and material and most were no longer completely intact. Aware that he simply did not have the troops to prevent the Russians from ultimately outflanking him, Gruf. Steiner implemented orders for a comprehensive pullback. Each unit of III. SS Corps was to disengage and begin its retreat to the Luga River upon the receipt of a designated password. Heavy weapons and artillery were given priority as these were the slowest elements. So on the afternoon of 26 January, the batteries of SS Artillery Regiment 11/"Nordland" assembled together in consecutive order in the area east of Rastchino-Osakova to begin their long march westwards.

On 27 January, the general withdrawal was fully underway. In the northern sector, the heavy weapons and infantry companies of SS Rgt. "Norge" traveled west over log roads. Behind them came the regimental engineers of 16th Company who had the tough job of destroying the fortified bunkers and strong-points and even the log roads themselves. Nothing could be left intact for the Russians! In addition, the engineers had to guard the key points along the march route. The Soviets were not long in giving pursuit and their armored elements began harassing the "Norge" columns from the south. As a result, many of the Norwegian grenadiers had to be put into temporary blocking positions to provide protection for the motorized units. To avoid becoming enemy targets, the transport convoys often had to split up without orders and make their way on their own to the west. The transport group serving 16./"Norge" was totally forgotten by Regimental HQ and was not given any withdrawal orders. At the very last moment this element escaped from the Reds by latching on to a slow moving Wehrmacht convoy.

To supervise the "Nordland" pullback, the Divisional commander, Brigfhr. von Scholz kept his HQ in place for as long as possible. It turned out that he waited too long. A strong enemy force struck past and severed the HQ from the rest of the division. Acting on his own initiative, the commander of 7th Co./"Norge" led a bold counterattack with a 17 man "storm troop" that reestablished links with "Nordland" HQ and set up an escape corridor.

The battalions of Regiment "Danmark" had also begun their retreat. II./"Danmark" tagged along after Regiment "Norge" on a route running from Gobowizy to Kirova to Begunizy, while III./"Danmark" carried out a 25 mile foot march to Kerstovo. The marches through the woods and swamps with sleighs full of supplies and wounded were continuous struggles that were exacerbated by running gun battles with enemy patrols. As with Rgt. "Norge," the engineers of "Danmark's" 16th Company covered the rear and flanks of the regiment. By nightfall, the regimental command post had been reestablished in Saoserje, with much of the regiment in blocking positions around the Lamocha bridge.

The critical southern flank of III. SS Corps was guarded by the SS Recce Btl. 11, which along with the Army Heavy Tank Detachment 502 and some other units, stayed put at Volossovo to keep the enemy armor at bay. "Nordland's" Panzer Detach-

ment 11 "Hermann von Salza," which had been in rear area emplacements around Jamburg, now moved out to help cover the retreat. At Kaporje, "HvS" ran into the communists and took its first casualties: a direct hit from an enemy tank killed Hstuf. Holtkamp (CO of 1st Company), along with his platoon leader, Ustuf. Schmidichen and an unidentified Unterschar-fuehrer.

4th SS Stormbrigade "Nederland" and the Kampfgruppe "Kueste" began their retreats on 28 January, a day later than most other Corps' units. They had been stationed in a peaceful area and were not directly threatened by the Russians. KGr. "Kueste" had already evacuated most of its heavy weapons and equipment while the troops remained behind to destroy their fortified positions. A minor crisis developed when the Fuehrer's HQ contacted Brigfhr. Kryssing to tell him to keep his soldiers in place. This directly contradicted the withdrawal orders issued by III. SS Corps. Kryssing tried to radio directly to the Fuehrer HQ for confirmation of the "stay put" directives, but he could not get through. In the end, Kryssing decided to obey Corps' HQ and the staff of KGr. "Kueste" began the pullback from Velikino to Ostroff.

On 28 January, all of the formations of III. SS Corps were in motion on their way to the west, but by now, for most units, it had become a "fighting retreat." Most of the batteries of SS Artillery Rgt. 11/"Nordland" had been forced into firing positions, both to cover for withdrawing convoys and to expend excess ammunition. I./SS "Norge" along with the "Nordland" Divisional staff and supported by III./SS Artillery Rgt. 11, retreated on a course parallel to the main highway in the north. The road itself could no longer be travelled on because it was now within enemy artillery range. Brigfhr. Fritz von Scholz, "Nordland's" commander, personally led the head of the column through the tangled woods and marshes.

To the south of the main highway, Kampfgruppe "Helling," with its soldiers from the 10th Luftwaffe Division and 1st Co./SS Engineer Battalion 11, had once again gotten into serious trouble. Mobile communist forces were in hot pursuit and were closing in fast when the men of KGr. "Helling" scrambled into the temporary firing positions of Ostuf. von Matt's battery from SS Artillery Rgt. 11. Von Matt's gunners were able to turn back the enemy attack force but it had been a near thing.

At Kerstova, III./"Danmark" came up against a very strong

Soviet advance element. The battalion commander Stubaf. Neergard-Jacobsen, sent his ordance officer, Ustuf. Herlov-Nielson to make a reconnaissance. Nielson never returned — he was captured by the Reds. Jacobsen then realized that his battalion had only one direction left open to it: south. It was not where he wanted to go, but given the desperate situation any detour was welcome!

III./SS Artillery Rgt. 11, which had been in blocking positions at Ratschino, finally got orders to pullout. Ostubaf. Karl, the commander of SS Artillery Rgt. 11, had been up with the foremost element of III. Detachment when he was urgently called back to regimental HQ. Karl started off towards the main road in his Volkswagen command car only to almost join in with a Russian convoy! Quickly he turned back and ordered III. Detachment to beat a hasty retreat. With much speed the unit loaded up its field pieces and moved out. The first battery in the column was that of Ostuf. Laerum. As it approached half-way to the main road it came under enemy fire. The Soviets had set up an ambush and were firing from three sides! Desperately the truck drivers tried to turn around but the road was too narrow. Heavy howitzers and the vehicles towing them ended up in the roadside ditches. The enemy surprise had been perfect; everything dissolved into chaos.

Fortunately there was enough distance between Laerum's battery and the rest of the artillery batteries so that they were forewarned and were able to find another route to the highway at Gurlovo. But many of the big guns had to be sacrificed so that the men could get through. By the evening of 28 January, the German forces were loosely bunched along a line running from Kerstovo in the north to Opolje in the south. Some of the rear guard units, such as 16./SS "Norge," that straggled in late, were simply incorporated into whatever larger Army or SS formation was in the vicinity.

Later in the day, substantial communist forces managed to occupy the vital town of Gurlovo, threatening the whole southern flank of the III. SS Corps' pullback. "Nordland's" commander, Brigfhr. von Scholz knew that Gurlovo had to be retaken. He gave the job to Hstuf. Hans Haemel, the CO of 7th Co./"Danmark." Haemel, an ex-NCO who had been promoted to officer's rank in the field, was one of the most proven commanders in the "Nordland" Division and if anyone could accomplish the task, he could. The counterattack on Gurlovo began at

dusk. 7./"Danmark" was supported by the "Danmark" motor-cycle platoon and by 2 assault guns from SS Anti-tank Detachment 11/"Nordland."

The assault guns led the advance, but time after time they came to a halt when confronted by heavy enemy fire. Watching them, Hstuf. Haemel became disgusted. He ran out to the lead assault gun and jumped aboard whereupon he gave a brisk tongue-lashing to the crew telling them to go forward no matter what. That did the trick. Once again the armored vehicles started up, and with guns blazing, advanced on Gurlovo. This time they didn't stop. Grenadiers from 7th Company were right behind them. The town soon burst into flames from the assault gun fire and no-quarter, hand-to-hand combat raged for its possession. After two hours of furious fighting the communist hold on Gurlova was broken. Beleagured troops that had been cutoff to the east could now move down the Gurlova road to safety.

By the afternoon of 29 January, most of the two "Nordland" regiments, SS Rgt 23 "Norge" and SS Artillery Rgt. 11, were still far to the east. Their withdrawal routes had been cut at several points by concentrations of enemy troops. For these SS men there would be no easy way out; they would have to fight their way westwards. The same conditions prevailed for SS Recce Btl. 11, which had been serving as rear guard along the main road to the southeast. The battalion's first job was to wipe out the Russian force that had been pushed out of Gurlovo by 7./"Danmark." Fortunately this proved to be an easy task as the Reds no longer had any stomach for fighting.

Further north, just 7 miles south of the main east-west highway, the SS engineers and Luftwaffe men of the hard-luck Kampfgruppe "Helling" spent 28 January fighting off sharp enemy attacks. Several times this little group was surrounded and had to initiate counterattacks to escape. In the early morning of 29 January, 1st Co./SS Engineer Btl. 11 from KGr. "Helling" finally linked up with the main body of the "Nordland" Division. Out of a strength of more than 150 men only two weeks earlier, 1st Company was down to 9 men, including the commanding officer, Ustuf. Arera. 9 other men had been killed and the rest wounded.

At noon on the 29th, strong enemy formations began closing in on the retreating SS troops near Opolje, west of Gurlovo. All morning long Opolje had been bombarded by the Red artillery. At the very last moment the field hospital in the Opolje church

had been evacuated; it was soon turned into a gaping ruin. III. Battalion/SS "Norge," led by Stubaf. Lohmann, was told to hold on to Opolje until nightfall. At dusk, III./"Norge" began a disengagement battle with the help of SS Anti-tank Detachment 11/"Nordland." The fighting soon became very intense and ugly. Hstuf. Roensch who commanded the SS Anti-tank Detachment 11 was killed beside his assault gun. Immediately, the unit's "advisor," Army Hauptmann Schulz-Streek, assumed command. With heavy losses, the III. SS Corps' rear guard left the ruins of Opolje to the Soviets.

In the course of 29 January, the first Corps' units began to reach their destination: the Luga River line. The city of Jamburg was the key to the upper Luga Front and it was here that the cumbersome batteries of SS Artillery Regiment 11 set up their new firing positions. To the east of Jamburg, SS Regiment "Norge" began to set up a bridgehead defensive perimeter on the east bank of the Luga. South of Jamburg, on the west bank of the Luga, 16./"Norge," part of I./"Norge" and some Army troops constructed a hasty defensive line. Around Pagoda, to the north of Jamburg, the units of SS Rgt. "Danmark" began going into position. II. and III./"Danmark" were placed along the railroad lines that ran from Kotly to Juchkoma.

"Danmark's" rear guard, 16th Engineer Company, had been stationed in Alexejevka to cover the other regimental units. After destroying the railroad bridge in the town, the engineers were ordered to withdraw down the main highway and rejoin the rest of the regiment. In gloomy, grey winter weather the men of the 16th Company began marching down the road in a rather disorderly manner. They thought that they were free of the enemy. However about a mile down the road one of the platoon leaders spotted some Red Army soldiers. The company commander, Ustuf. Arionius, verified the sighting and quickly ordered his men off the highway. The Soviets, who had also observed the SS men, were baffled by their sudden disappearance, and began moving up the road towards where they had last seen them. When they got to within 400 feet of the prone SS engineers, Ustuf. Arionius barked out a sharp command: "Free fire!" Simultaneously a loud shout of "Hurrah!" broke out from the Russians as they recognized their foe. Then all of the weapons of 16th Co. began blazing away and the head of the communist column was cut to pieces.

But the enemy quickly recovered. From a safe distance they

poured massed infantry and artillery fire into the SS men. Ustuf. Arionius stood up and waved for a pullback. The engineers ran for about a mile to the south where they were able to reach the safety of a forest. Four wounded were brought with them but three dead had to be left behind.

Up in the north, Kampfgruppe "Kueste" and Brigade "Nederland" were in the second day of their withdrawal operations. The route taken by "Nederland" had led it through knee-deep snow and thick forests, so the going was slow. Weapons and supplies were pulled on sleds. The Soviets also turned up much sooner than expected, though they chose not to pursue the Dutch SS troops through the woods. Instead, they limited themselves to a long-range shelling of the general area through which "Nederland" was moving. This random fire caused a great deal of confusion to the retreating grenadiers who could not tell from which direction it came. As a result, there was a good deal of stopping and starting by the different march groups as they tried to reorient themselves away from the enemy.

The "Nederland" Brigade staff almost didn't get away; just as it began to pullout, its headquarters buildings in Lutchski were set on fire by enemy artillery shells. As usual, the engineers were the last to leave and they tried to delay the Soviet pursuers with land mines and booby-traps. Stubaf. Shock's SS Anti-tank Detachment 54 also tried to cover the rear of the withdrawal, but the big assault guns were unable to follow the route taken by the infantry. In the end, this detachment veered off on its own to the south-southwest. At Keikino on the Luga River, "Nederland's" assault guns approached the main bridge which was guarded by three convalescent companies and a Flak battery under Hstuf. Hoel, a former Norwegian Army engineer. Because of their weight, Hoel turned the assault guns away and they had to travel down to Jamburg to cross the Luga.

Ostuf. Kuhne and the "Nederland" Brigade motorcycle company started out trying to protect the flanks of the main body of the unit, but they were left on their own when the foot columns started floundering off into the thick forest. In the Kotzly area the Soviets actually penetrated the escape routes of "Nederland's" SS Regiments 48 and 49, but they failed to realize what they had done. Equally ignorant of what was going on, the bulk of the two regiments passed casually through the gap that existed between the Soviet lead element and its nearest follow-up unit. However, the last battalion in line, II./SS Rgt. 49 "De

Ruyter," was not so lucky; the Soviets were in the process of closing-up their ranks as it arrived on the scene. The battalion commander, Hstuf. Ertel, felt that only a surprise attack would carry the day. With the help of the Flak guns from 14./"De Ruyter," Ertel personally led an old fashioned infantry charge across an open field. The Russians instantly scattered and the Dutch and German SS men were able to get through unscathed.

"Nederland" and KGr. "Kueste" gradually reached Keikino, with the enemy close behind, and their troops were thrown into hasty defenses along the Luga. Hstuf. Wanhoefer and his Dutch SS engineers from SS Engineer Btl. 54, blew up the river bridge north of Pagoda in the face of the communists. On 30 January, SS Rgt. 48 "GS" became the last Dutch SS unit to reach the Luga and it was put into positions running north of Keikino. In the evening of the 30th, Hstuf. Wanhoefer's engineers sent the component parts of the Keikino bridge flying into the air in a tremendous explosion.

CHAPTER IV

Battle for the Luga River Line

The new commander of Army Group North, Feldmarschall Model, now intended to build up a new front behind the Luga River. III. SS Panzer Corps (Germanic) was given the task of defending the Northern Luga sector and the Jamburg bridgehead on the east bank of the river. Obergruppenfuehrer (Ogruf.) Steiner, argued that the Luga Line had already been hopelessly compromised by the breakthrough of the Soviet 8th Army in the south and that an immediate pullback to a permanent defensive line running to the north and south of Lake Peipus on the Estonian frontier, was essential. For the moment, Steiner's protest was overruled and III. SS Corps was ordered to stay put on the Luga.

On 31 January, the Soviets broke through the Luga lines between Hungerburg on the Gulf of Finland and Krovizy to the south. This sector, running for some 13 miles was considered to be "unimpenetrable" wilderness and had been held down only by an Army NCO training company. This unit resisted bravely from individual strongpoints, but by day's end both of the company's officers had been killed and fully one-half of the personnel had become casualties. Survivors reported news of this critical development to III. SS Corps HQ on 1 February 1944. Small groups of Red Army soldiers were able to push through to near the Narva River in the west.

31 January also brought a massive Soviet assault on the vulnerable Jamburg bridgehead. SS Regiment "Norge" bore the brunt of the initial fighting but it soon spread to the positions of SS Regiment "Danmark" near Padoga. After two hours of furious combat, the "Danmark" regimental front began showing signs of collapse. To try and firm things up again, a reserve company, 5./"Danmark" under the Dutch-German Ostuf. Seebach, launched a counterattack. Seebach's men were able to temporarily drive back the enemy assault force. But after returning to the "Danmark" lines, Seebach discovered that he had left 7 wounded men behind. He had to go and get them! Back went the company into no-man's-land and the Reds greeted them with a blinding hail of fire. Seebach personally led his com-

mand, and in the middle of a desperate fire-fight saw to it that all of the wounded men were rescued. For his heroic actions, Ostuf. Walter Seebach was awarded the Knight's Cross to the Iron Cross.

The next day, 1 February, found the Soviets back in renewed strength. The main attack was made against the positions of III./"Danmark" which had been badly weakened in the recent withdrawal. 9th and 10th Companies began to buckle. Stubaf. Neergard-Jacobsen quickly organized his lightly wounded into a reserve company, and this unit, in conjunction with 9th Co., was able to throw back an enemy spearhead. But the situation continued to worsen. Ostuf. Worsoe-Larson was killed leading his 11th Co./"Danmark" in an unsuccessful counterattack, and Stubaf. Jacobsen was wounded twice in the fighting. Finally, as he was being carried to the rear for treatment, Jacobsen ordered a general pullback.

The Soviets, led by a sub-machine gun battalion, kept the pressure on. One by one the key points of the bridgehead fell and the SS defenders crossed back across the river. To the south of Jamburg, the engineers of 16 Co./"Norge" were forced to cross to the west bank at dusk in rubber rafts. They were incorporated into the positions of I./"Norge" which guarded III. SS Corps' southern flank or right wing. At 2100 hours in the evening, 16th Company's engineers were astounded to see men from I./"Norge" begin to leave their positions. Ustuf. Schirmer, commanding 16./"Norge," was informed by officers from I. Battalion that a signal flare had been sighted, signifying a retreat to the railroad lines. But Schirmer stubbornly refused to take his company out of position without confirming orders.

A little bit later, the leader of 16th Company's 3rd Platoon, the Norwegian Unterscharfuehrer (Uscha.) Hokkerup, reported to Ustuf. Schirmer that I./"Norge's" abandoned positions to the south had been infiltrated by the Soviets. Schirmer decided to try and retake them. Gathering up 3rd Platoon he led a hasty counterattack against the occupied trenches. It was not a well thought out move. In a short, violent action the platoon was driven back in confusion. In very quick order the Soviets launched their own sally against 16th Company. The company command post soon found itself under siege and the positions around it changed sides continuously in hand-to-hand fighting.

Ustuf. Schirmer and his small staff were helplessly trapped in the HQ bunker which had become the focal point of the battle.

When the Russians started trying to break into the half-buried log and earth structure, Schirmer played his last trick. He got on his radio set and sent an urgent message to Ustuf. Dall's 13th Co./"Norge" that was in supporting positions to the west. 13th Company consisted of light field artillery or "heavy" weapons. Schirmer shouted out his message: "Fire on the bunker!"

Seconds later, 15cm shells began bursting all around the company command post causing the bunker to shake and tremble. But it did the job; the Soviets were expelled. Ustuf. Schirmer led his staff out of the bunker, regrouped his platoons and sent them back to plug up gaps in the lines to the south. But when dawn broke on the next day, 16./"Norge" found itself facing an extremely powerful enemy force in place in the old I./"Norge" trenches, with extensive artillery support. Far more disturbing was the long Red Army column that could be seen in the distance moving towards the west! 13th Company kept up a heavy disruptive fire until around noon when it prepared to evacuate its heavy guns. At this point, the "Norge" engineers and the men from the "Norge" Flak company were forced to begin fighting a delaying action to allow the rest of the regiment to disengage. Orders or not, it was clear that another retreat, this time to the Narva River Line, was in the making. Later on 1 February, Jamburg was abandoned and the last Luga River bridge was blown up. The soldiers who had only just gotten into position along the Luga found themselves swept up in another desperation withdrawal. The Narva River was now their only hope!

CHAPTER V

The Battle for Estonia Begins

During the retreat from the Luga to the Narva Rivers the Regiments "Norge" and "Danmark" of the "Nordland" Division, covered for each other in a leap-frog, fighting pullback. The last battalion in the retreat, III./"Norge" found itself dealing with continuous, violent Soviet attacks. At one point the regimental headquarters was also threatened and the commander of III./"Norge" led his battalion in a desperate counter-attack to rescue it. The HQ staff was saved but III. Battalion was almost lost in the confusion of the fighting. Only a last ditch effort by the battalion drivers, clerks and radio operators to fend off a surging Red attack helped the unit win through to safety. Stubaf. Lohmann, the battalion CO, was at the forefront of the action and fell wounded.

From Jamburg to Keikino along the Luga River on 1 February 1944, other German units began assembling for the retreat. The cumbersome artillery elements were the first to reach the new Narva River line. Far to the south, at the HQ of Army Group North, Feldmarschall Model was upset by what he considered a precipitous withdrawal from the northern Luga. He sent orders to the commander of SS Artillery Rgt. 11/"Nordland," Ostubaf. Karl, to turn around and take his batteries back to the Luga River. The order could not be obeyed since the Luga River line no longer existed!

On 30 January, the rear area personnel of Kampfgruppe "Kueste" under the leadership of the battle-group chief-of-staff, Stubaf. Englehardt, had received directives from Ogruf. Steiner to begin the fortification of the Narva River line and at 1700 on 31 January KGr "Kueste" was ordered to fall back on the Narva. On 1 and 2 February, elements of all the III. SS Corps units began streaming into the new battle line. Dispersed soldiers, marines and sailors along with the survivors of the broken Leningrad divisions were consolidated into makeshift groups along the west bank of the Narva. The "Nederland" Brigade and the "Nordland" Division were given the important job of defending a large bridgehead opposite the city of Narva on the east bank of the river.

In the last hours of the flight of the Narva bridgehead, the Dutch Rottenfuehrer (Rttfhr.) Caspar Sporck from 5./SS Recce Btl. 11, had stayed back alone with his armored cannon wagon. He patrolled far to the east of the main battle lines, providing protection for stragglers and driving back enemy armored vehicles. At dusk on 2 February, with the communists in close pursuit, Sporck's assault gun crossed into the German lines; it was the last vehicle to do so.

The European soldiers were weary and depressed as they settled into their new positions. There were virtually no fortifications and a designated line of gun and tank emplacements proved to exist only on paper. No prepared bunkers existed, so the tired, dirty and hungry troops had to immediately begin digging-in. Directly opposite of them appeared what seemed to be endless hordes of Red Army soldiers, who no doubt, would soon resume their attack. But even as thousands of combat troops arrived at Narva, an even greater number of Russian civilian refugees fled past them, hoping to find safety from the Bolsheviks in the cities to the west.

Narva is an ancient city in northeastern Estonia that has been dominated in the past by the Danes, Swedes and Teutonic Knights, all of whom fortified it against the Russians. Its strategic location is undeniable. Located along the river of the same name and surrounded to the north and south by nearly impenetrable swamps and forests, it has served as a gateway to Estonia and Scandinavia. The location of the mammoth Lake Peipus at the source of the Narva River has served as an additional asset to the defense of the area. During the War of Estonian Independence in 1919-20, Narva withstood countless Bolshevik attacks and became a symbol of Estonian freedom.

On the west bank of the Narva River at Narva, stands the old fortified German castle known as Hermannsburg. Directly opposite of it on the east bank, is its Russian equivalent, the fortress of Ivangorod. In 1944, these two edifices would become well known to the volunteers from all over Europe who came to the Narva Front to fight the communists. Foremost among these soldiers would be the brave men of the 20th Estonian SS Division who were fighting directly for their homeland. The Soviet steamroller hoped to overwhelm the Narva Front with the same ease that it had displayed elsewhere against vastly weakened German forces. But at Narva they were coming up against men who were not only highly motivated and dedicated

soldiers, but who were also skilled practitioners of the profession. These were the volunteers of the III. SS German Panzer Corps!

The Reds quickly massed three huge forces against the Narva Front. These were the: 47th Army, 2nd Storm Army and 8th Army. Opposing them were a very mixed batch of German, Estonians and foreign volunteers who were serving in a crazy-quilt assortment of Army, SS, Navy, Police and Air Force units. Deployed in the north, adjacent to the Gulf of Finland, was the Kampfgruppe "Kueste," which maintained forces both along the shore of the Gulf of Finland and around the city of Hungerburg on the northern reaches of the Narva River. To the south of Hungerburg, around Ssivertsi, were three ad hoc battle-groups composed of displaced soldiers, and the SS Engineer Btl. 54/"Nederland."

In the Narva bridgehead itself were the following units: SS Rgt. 48 "General Seyffardt" at Popovka in the northern part of the bridgehead, SS Rgt. 49 "De Ruyter" on the Jamburg road before Lilienbach in the east, and SS Rgt. 24 "Danmark" on the south-southeastern part of the bridgehead perimeter. Mixed in between these regiments were police elements and small battle-groups from the 61st, 225th and 170th Infantry Divisions. The west bank of the Narva River to the south of the city of Narva was held by the SS Rgt. 23 "Norge."

In the first days of February 1944, the Soviet efforts to destroy the Narva bridgehead began. Heavy shelling went on for days without pause, reducing all buildings to rubble. "Nordland's" commander, Brigadefuehrer von Scholz or "Alte Fritz" as he was known to his men, had set up his divisional command post in two civilian buses so that he could rush from one spot in the bridgehead to another as the situation dictated. During his front line inspections, von Scholz frequently stripped off his jacket and went to work side-by-side with his privates as they dug ditches and built barbed-wire impediments. It was no wonder that his men regarded him with great respect and affection. Despite his aristocratic background, "Alte Fritz" was not a pretentious or arrogant man.

The first real enemy threat came in early February, when a communist force crossed the Narva River midway between Hungerburg and Narva, and built up a small bridgehead at Kudrukula. The Danish Brigadefuehrer Kryssing personally led a courageous counterattack with the reserves of KGr. "Kueste,"

and was able to drive the enemy back across the river. On the night after the annihilation of the Soviet bridgehead at Kudrukula, part of 7th Co./SS "Norge" led by Oberscharfuehrer Schacher turned up on the east bank of the Narva. In January, during a wild fire-fight at Kirovo, the Norwegian company commander, Ustuf. Knapp, had been killed along with 30 of his men and the company had been dispersed. It had been given up for lost, but Oscha. Schacher had miraculously brought the survivors through to safety.

During the night of 3 February, the Soviets made another crossing over the ice-covered Narva River near Kudrukula. This time they were counterattacked by the scout platoon from SS Panzer Detachment "Hermann von Salza" and were again forced to withdraw. The next night, the Reds tried to cross again, but the "HvS" soldiers were waiting for them and again repulsed them with heavy losses. On the next morning, four Russian corpses were found right on the lip of the forward SS outpost positions. Understandably, the attempted Soviet crossings started making the defenders trigger happy. On the night of 6 February, a single SS grenadier who had gotten cutoff behind the enemy lines and who had made it all the way from the Luga River to the Narva, attempted to cross the icebound river. About two-thirds of the way over, he stopped, waved his arms and shouted: "Don't shoot comrades!" But at the same moment a nervous SS sentry responded with a burst of machine-gun fire that instantly killed him. It was but one of many little tragedies that were bound to occur.

For the next several days, fighting raged on this sector, and finally, on 12 February, the Reds were able to establish a strong cross-river bridgehead between Riigi and Ssivertsi. The enemy was initially contained by an Army battle-group at Riigi (KGr. "Wengler") and by a company of the SS Engineer Btl. 54/"Nederland" at Ssivertsi. The Soviets made a particularly intense effort to smash through the Dutch engineer positions in the Ssivertsi cemetery. At one point they succeeded in capturing the SS Engineer Btl. 54's trenches, but Hstuf. Wanhoefer led his men in a spirited counterattack that retook them.

In the meantime, a Russian motorized column actually broke out of the Ssivertsi bridgehead to the west. A hastily assembled battle-group led by Stubaf. Kruegel that consisted of III. SS Corps' reserves and the "Norge" motorcycle platoon, was able to block the enemy force on the main road to Talinn, about ½



Estonian Waffen-Unterscharfuehrer der SS Haralt Nugiseks from SS Regiment 46. Knight's Cross recipient and hero of the Narva Front. Later missing-in-action.

mile from Pahklemäe. Simultaneously, the assault gun detachments of both "Nordland" and "Nederland" were sent from the city of Narva to the danger zone.

The Ssivertsi bridgehead soon became the most critical point on the whole front. If the Russians succeeded there, Narva city would fall quickly and the Narva bridgehead on the east bank of the river would be cutoff. All troops that could be spared were rushed to the Ssivertsi salient. These now included the valiant engineer companies of both "Norge" and "Danmark" whose members had been laying down minefields around the Narva bridgehead. They were joined by "emergency" companies that had been hurriedly formed from rear area personnel.

On the morning of 13 February, the Soviets attempted another crossing of the Narva in the sector held down by SS Engineer Btl. 54. After laying down a heavy artillery barrage, the Reds attacked both from the north out of the Ssivertsi bridgehead and from the east across the ice. Hstuf. Wanhoefer and his Dutch SS engineers were concealed behind cemetery grave-stones. They first turned their weapons on the river crossing force and succeeded in driving these soldiers back in retreat. Then the engineers dealt with the bridgehead attackers and in a short time had also driven them back. The reward for repulsing the Red infantry was not long in coming: renewed heavy artillery shelling of SS Engineer Battalion 54's positions!

Later on, fate began to favor the defense. The ice flow in the river showed signs of cracking and German artillery joined in to help speed up the process. By evening the communist force at Ssivertsi was cutoff from any more cross-river assistance. Now the Germans prepared to launch their own counterattack on Ssivertsi. The "Nederland" assault gun detachment led by Stubaf. Schock made the first head-on foray only to be driven back by accurate anti-tank fire emanating from the east bank of the river. The brave Sturmbannfuehrer Schock was killed in the barrage. Tiger tanks were now used to bring up supplies and evacuate the wounded from the German positions as they afforded better protection against the enemy artillery.

In the sector of the scout platoon of SS Panzer Detachment "Hermann von Salza," a small party of 3 men began to cross the Narva ice-pack that was still in place on the night of 13 February. Halfway over, a sentry's machine-gun opened up on them but fortunately scored no hits. One of the men yelled out: "Don't shoot, Oberscharfuehrer Schenke here!" They were the last survivors out of a group of 38 SS men who had been trapped behind the enemy lines. They had been eating plants and tree bark to survive and marched by night and slept by day. The SS men who had been killed by a sentry on the ice on 6 February, was now identified as one of their companions.

One of the understrength emergency companies that had been sent to the Ssivertsi sector now received some startling orders from "Nordland" Divisional HQ. Ustuf. Schirmer, the commander, read the orders to his men: "You are to attack Ssivertsi with the Swedish memorial in the northern ruins of the village as your goal!" Schirmer had a sinking feeling; his small command would most likely be shot to pieces trying to carry

out this assignment. Fortunately, Fritz von Scholz came forward himself and after inspecting the terrain, withdrew his orders. The SS emergency companies, actually no better than platoons in size, would stay in place and be subordinated to a Wehrmacht company led by Hauptmann Lempke.

Kampfgruppe "Kruegel," formed from parts of the Regiment "Norge" and led by a "Norge" battalion commander, Stubaf. Albrecht Kruegel, had managed to completely encircle the enemy pocket at Ssivertsi. It then was instructed to move in for the kill. This phase of the operation did not prove so easy. A very bitter battle developed and Stubaf. Kruegel was wounded. He was replaced by Hstuf. Thoeny. It was left to soldiers from the "Nordland" and "Nederland" engineer companies to complete the job of securing the destroyed village. They were only able to accomplish this task due to the fact that the communists had decided to pull out their forces and concentrate them in another west bank enclave at Vepskula.

11th Company/"Norge" led by Oscha. Hollinger, carried out a vigorous counterattack against the Red soldiers escaping from Ssivertsi, but it was repulsed in savage fighting and Hollinger was wounded. 13./"Norge" and Artillery Detachment 54/"Nederland" kept the enemy positions at Vepskula under a heavy fire, but the Soviets were well dug-in with fortified bunkers and foxholes constructed along the river bank. From the east shore came massive artillery support for the communist bridgehead. Uscha. Nielsen, who commanded a mortar section of 11./"Norge," counted 72 enemy rounds landing on the roof of his bunker. 11th Company had taken heavy losses and in fact, had no officers left. 31 survivors from the company had been placed in the charge of a Wehrmacht Hauptmann, while another 20 had simply been incorporated into 16th Co./SS Rgt. "Danmark."

Although the main enemy bridgehead remained intact, its northern sector around Riigi had been forced back by the 336th Grenadier Regiment led by the Wehrmacht Oberst (Colonel) Wengler, while the western perimeter had been penetrated by a Tiger tank platoon led by Lt. Carius of the 502nd Heavy Panzer Detachment. The task of eliminating the main Vepskula bridgehead was to fall on the shoulders of Estonian volunteers from the 20th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (Estonian #1), which had been brought to the Narva Front on 20 February 1944. The Estonian SS battalions were gradually worked into the weak German defensive lines from Hungerburg to Narva.

The sector due south of Hungerburg was taken over by Waffen-Grenadier Regiment der SS 46 commanded by Waffen-Standartenfuehrer Tuuling. I./SS 46 under Hstuf. Silvert was placed south of Kudrukula and II./SS 46 led by Ostuf. Weber was deployed around Riigi. Waffen-Sturmabannfuehrer Haralt Riipalu's Waffen-Grenadier Regiment der SS 45 was in place farther to the south with I./SS 45 under Waffen-Hstuf. Triik placed between Vasa and Venskula and II./SS 45 commanded by Waffen-Hstuf. Maitla in positions from Ssivertsi to the northern outskirts of Narva where it linked up with the SS Engineers Btl. 54/"Nederland."

The Estonian volunteers were quickly thrown into the fight against the enemy bridgehead. Finally, after more than a week of skirmishing, on 29 February, the 22 year-old Waffen-Unterscharfuehrer Haralt Nugiseks made a major breach in the communist lines at Vepskula with his assault troop. The attack began going forth on its own momentum. Twice Nugiseks and his men stormed forward and twice they were driven to the ground by the enemy. But the last time they ended up only 160 feet from the Soviet trench line. With one last, desperate effort, the Estonian SS men jumped up, and led by Nugiseks, spring into the Russian positions.

In savage hand-to-hand fighting, the brave Estonians wiped out the Soviet bridgehead and secured the river bank. The vital north-south road was now reopened and the first great crisis on the Narva Front had passed. The fresh Estonian troops had accomplished what the tired men of III. SS Panzer Corps had been unable to do. At the conclusion of the fighting between Hungerburg and Narva, Stubaf. Kruegel and Waffen-Uscha. Nugiseks were awarded the Knight's Cross. Nugiseks was the first Estonian to receive that coveted decoration, but he would not be the last.

CHAPTER VI

Enemy Landing at Merekula

Two days after the establishment of the Soviet bridgehead at Ssivertsi, an ambitious enemy amphibious operation was carried out well behind the German lines at the northern Estonian sea-coast town of Merekula. The Merekula landing was carried in an effort to outflank the Narva line and take the pressure off of the Soviet west bank bridgeheads. The defense of the Estonian seacoast was entrusted to Brigfhr. Kyssing's Kampfgruppe "Kueste." The old Danish soldier had just absorbed the loss of both of his sons; one had been killed in the far south of Russia while on service with the 5th SS Panzer Division "Wiking" and the other, an Untersturmfuehrer in SS Recce Btl. 11, had been wounded during the withdrawal from Volossovo to Jamburg and had fallen into enemy hands. He soon died in Soviet captivity.

KGr. "Kueste's" forces along the northeastern Estonian sea-coast were deployed as follows: an Estonian Police battalion held the ground between Mummassaare and Merekula, with a Naval coastal artillery battery supporting it; due west of Hungerburg was the Naval Infantry Battalion "Hohnschild" composed of sailors converted into soldiers; in Hungerburg itself was the Naval Infantry Battalion "Schneider"; at Merekula was the staff of the battered 227th Infantry Division which had been reorganized into Kampfgruppe "Generalleutnant Berlin"; between Merekula and Hungerburg were additional artillery batteries and the staff of KGr. "Kueste" was situated in the tiny fishing town of Auga.

In the night of 13/14 February 1944, 12 small steamboats and trawlers crossed the Gulf of Finland heading west. On board were Soviet amphibious assault troops. After reaching an area near the disembarkation point (almost directly opposite Merekula), the boats cut their motors and drifted in as close to shore as possible. At a point about 150 feet from the coast, the Soviet marines began disembarking into the freezing, waist-deep water. Silently, carrying infantry weapons and ammunition, they made their way ashore.

The initial landing party surprised and overpowered two

squads from 3rd Cö./Battalion "Hohnschild" but the ruckus from the fire-fight alerted other defensive forces in the area. The fighting quickly spilled into Merekula and the Reds quickly took most of the town except for the building housing the staff of KGr. "Gen.Lt.Berlin." This building was protected by barbed wire obstacles and the staff members put up a spirited resistance. To the northeast, the remainder of 3rd Co./Btl. "Hohnschild" was able to quickly seal off the coastline, while from the southwest, naval artillery batteries zeroed in on the invasion force with their fire.

From the light of the blazing weapons, the defenders were able to make out the shapes of the landing boats just offshore; three of them were rapidly shot to pieces as they ran aground while another was gunned down and sunk in the open sea. On the beach itself, at least 100 of the enemy soldiers had been killed when they got tangled up in barbed wire barricades. The rest of the invasion force had either reached the town of Merekula or was pinned down in the scrub bushes and trees that lined the coastal sand dunes.

The staff of KGr. "Kueste" was on top of the situation from the beginning. At 0330 hours on the morning of 13 February, the first rumblings from the infantry and artillery fire being exchanged at Merekula were heard at the "Kueste" HQ in Auga. Without knowing what had really transpired yet, the "Kueste" chief-of-staff, Stubaf. Englehardt, gather up 50 members of the 70 man HQ staff guard and led them to the positions of Battalion "Hohnschild" which lay in the path of the firing. In the meantime, Brigfhr. Kyssing received an overview of the situation through field telephone reports and he soon learned that 2 squads from 3./"Btl. "Hohnschild" had vanished and that the staff of KGr. "Gen.Lt.Berlin" was besieged in Merekula.

Kryssing immediately put his reserves on alert and ordered Stubaf. Englehardt to Puhkova to assemble an emergency armored group from the SS Recce Btl. 11. En route, Englehardt mustered an additional 50 men from the reserve companies and sent them together with a platoon of 2cm Flak guns to Merekula. Still in the darkness of pre-dawn at 0530 hours, this group reached the town and linked up with the beleaguered KGr. "Gen. Lt.Berlin." The Russians in Merekula now came up against solidified resistance. At first light, Korvette-Kapitan Hohnschild took command of the German troops there.

The German counterattack began at 0900 hours. 12 Stukas

led off with a bombing raid on Merekula, but the pilots had been incorrectly informed that all of the town was in Soviet hands. The first two Stukas began bombing the German positions at Merekula, causing some losses. Instantly, some "very light" flares were shot up to indicate the German lines. At the very last moment, 10 of the Stuka pilots saw them and veered off. The two pinchers of the German ground assault force began moving in on the invaders. From the northeast came Stubaf. Englehardt with 3 tanks and 30 accompanying panzer grenadiers while from the southeast, 5th Co./SS Recce Btl. 11 rolled into the attack with its armored cannon wagons.

The enemy landing force was rapidly crushed between the SS battle-groups and by 1000 hours, it was all over. 300 enemy dead were counted on the battlefield and more than 200 Russians had been captured. An additional 75 were soon flushed out of the woods and dunes. Another 50 bodies, along with large quantities of equipment, later washed up on the beaches. Although daring, the Merekula landing operation had been turned into a disaster for the Soviets thanks to the rapid, decisive actions taken by the men of KGr. "Kueste." Somewhat after 1000 hours on the morning of 14 February, the results of the successful defensive engagement along the North Estonian coast, were radioed in to III. SS Panzer Corps' HQ.

CHAPTER VII

The Struggle for Narva's Southern Front

While III. SS Panzer Corps was working to strengthen the bridgehead at Narva, at Krivasso to the south, the Soviet 8th Army had established a strong counter-bridgehead to be used as the base for a major strike to the north. The German forces deployed on this part of the front consisted of parts of the 170th and 227th Infantry Divisions, most of the "elite" Panzer-grenadier Division "Feldherrnhalle," part of the 61st Infantry Division and an assortment of mixed battle-groups. There were no Waffen-SS troops initially in the area.

On 24 February 1944, the Soviets made a dangerous inroad that took them to a point on the main railroad line between the station house and church at Vaivara in the rear area of III. SS Corps. It was a very dangerous development. Near Vaivara there were only 2 battalions from the 61st Infantry Division to contain the communist incursion, which because of its shape was known as the "west sack." At Lipsusi, a little farther to the east, the enemy had created another bulge in the lines which was referred to as the "east sack." At two different points, the rail line from Wesenberg which supplied the Narva Front had been severed. If the Russians managed to reach the nearby east-west highway, the situation would become critical.

All German units in the Vaivara sector were put on combat alert. 2nd Company/Heavy Panzer Detachment 502 set 4 of its Tiger tanks up against the "west sack" and its remaining 2 against the "east sack." SS Division "Nordland" sent all of the available troops that it could to the sector. This amounted to the remnants of companies from Regiment "Norge" that had been badly battered at Ssivertsi. They were now formed into battle-groups with the addition of transport and staff personnel. A staff group from the SS Panzer Detachment 11 "Hermann von Salza," led by Uscha. Kipp, took up observer's positions in the Vaivara church to help relay intelligence information on to the SS troops.

On the morning of 25 February, the "Norge" SS battle-group led by regimental commander Arnold Stoffers, launched a major attack to the southeast of Vaivara in an effort to cut-

off the "west sack" from the main Russian lines. The foremost assault force, led by Ustuf. Stock, managed to breakthrough the enemy defenses, but heavy casualties were taken and Ustuf. Stock was wounded. While leading a spearhead element that tried to exploit the initial success, Ostubaf. Stoffers was killed in action. The "Norge" assault then began to bog down and the Reds struck back. Violent, desperate close combat raged unabated. Mortar and artillery sections added their weight to the struggle. Armored cars from the always ready SS Recce Btl. 11 rushed in to lend support to the SS grenadiers. Finally, with the help of some Tiger tanks, the "Norge" battle-group disengaged from the enemy death-grip and both sides fell back exhausted.

The Red forces in the "west sack" had been forced to give up their positions on the railroad lines and the threat to the east-west highway had been averted. In addition, the troops of 61st Infantry Division and the Panzer-grenadier Division "Feldherrnhalle" had been able to improve their defensive positions in the so-called "boot" sector that lay inbetween the east and west "sacks." But general fighting went on in the area well into April.

In March 1944, the troops of SS Regiment 23 "Norge" were successfully able to contain an enemy armored thrust from the "west sack." With a brisk counterattack they were able to re-stabilize the front. Given the wild terrain, the nature of the fighting was often one-on-one. The following incident, taken from the January 1980 issue of "Siegrunen" magazine, is a good example of what often transpired:

"With the backing of Hstuf. Bergfeld's guns from 13./"Norge", Ustuf. Dall attacked with his men towards Sirgala. Suddenly he found himself alone with 2 radiomen. A T-34 had emerged from a fork in the road to separate the unit. Dall was unable to return to his troops. Just by chance, he had a panzerfaust (single-shot bazooka) with him. Watching the tank, he exclaimed: "It's you or me!" One of the radiomen could support him with a machine-gun. Dall dashed out from cover, and at close range, set the T-34 ablaze. At the same time he drew vigorous enemy rifle fire. The machine-gunner began rattling away to assist him. When the Soviet tank crew bailed out the MG rounds cascaded about them, bouncing off the armored plates of the tank. But the Russians made it to cover.

"For a half-hour the two small groups of men stalked

each other in cat and mouse fashion. But Ustuf. Dall was able to outwit the tank crew and with clever maneuvering, picked them all off. During the whole time, the wrecked Russian tank burned merrily on in the clearing. So yet another Soviet tank had met its fate."

When the "Norge" grenadiers captured Sirgala in late March 1944, they were able, once and for all, to end the threat of the "west sack." But in the captured Soviet positions they found a new horror story. In the bunkers and trenches were the bodies of many Estonian civilians who had been shot at close range. In a mortar position the corpses of several Estonian women were found. They had been used to carry ammunition and supplies to the front but were executed when the Red Army pulled back. This was another true indication, that whether in Croatia or Estonia, the inhuman face of the Bolshevik beast was still the same. For the soldiers, particularly the Estonian volunteers, these atrocities only served to stiffen their resolve to battle the communists to the finish.

In April, 1944, the SS troops in southern Estonia were able to rejoin the rest of III. SS Corps on the Narva River Front. The II. and III. Battalions of Rgt. "Norge" were positioned to the south of Narva on the west bank of the river. Their lines connected to those of the "Feldherrnhalle" Division in the marshland to the southwest. Part of I. Battalion was used to reinforce the III.Btl./"Norge," while the rest of the unit returned to Germany to be reformed from a new batch of Norwegian recruits. I./"Danmark" was also sent home for refitting. Due to circumstances neither battalion would ever return to its proper regiment. In late 1944 they were attached to the 5th SS Division "Wiking," another European volunteer formation. For the war, "Nordland's" 2 panzergrenadier regiments had to make do with 2 battalions each.

Some personnel changes were also taking place. Ostubaf. Fritz Knoechlein, the former commander of the Flak gun detachment of 16th SS Division "Reichsfuehrer-SS," took charge of Regiment "Norge," replacing the fallen Ostubaf. Stoffers. After the war, Knoechlein would be victimized by a British arranged 'war crimes' trial, despite being severely tortured by the British, he refused to confess to trumped-up charges, which he considered totally false. As a result, Knoechlein was found "guilty" and executed. But during the war he proved himself to be an outstanding military commander. Later in the month of

April 1944, following the death of Ostubaf. Graf von Westphalen to a mortal wound, Stubaf. Kruegel would take command of the Regiment "Danmark" in the Narva bridgehead.

The men of Regiment "Norge" literally had to hack their new positions out of the wilderness. Roads had to be "burned" through the swamps with the aid of gasoline. Once a clearing had been made, the trails were "corduroyed" with fallen logs to provide vehicle access. Due to the nature of the terrain, the sector had to be defended by small log-built strongpoints, not unlike the "forts" of the old American frontier.



SS-Obersturmfuehrer Helmut Scholz the brilliant commander of II. Battalion/SS Regiment 49 "De Ruyter"/Brigade "Nederland." He was decorated with both the Knight's Cross and Oakleaves for his actions on the Narva Front.

CHAPTER VIII

The Fight for the Narva Bridgehead

On 1 and 2 February 1944, the formations of the III. SS Panzer Corps had begun moving into the Narva bridgehead area with the forces of the 47th, 2nd Storm and 8th Soviet Armies right on their heels. The commanders of "Nordland" and "Nederland," Brigadefuehrers von Scholz and Wagner, were forced to reassemble their troops as quickly as possible. I. Battalion/SS Rgt. "Danmark" led by Hstuf. Per Sorensen, took up positions around the main Narva-Jamburg road. To the north of I./"Danmark" were the battalions of the "Nederland" Brigade, while to the south, were more soldiers from the "Nordland" Division. Placed at the key points in the rather flimsy front, were Tiger tanks from the Army Heavy Tank Detachment 502 and 1st Company/SS Panzer Detachment "HvS"/Div. "Nordland." Along with them were the assault guns from "Nordland" and "Nederland." They absorbed the weight of the early battles for the bridgehead.

The fortification of the bridgehead positions went on continuously while the SS armor and artillery were able to keep the enemy forces at bay. Reformation of companies and platoons took place as conditions permitted. The 9th and 10th Luftwaffe Field Divisions had been so badly shattered that they were now disbanded and their personnel were transferred into units of III. SS Corps. Much hard fighting went on at Lilienbach on the northeast part of the bridgehead. This sector was initially held by a mixed battle-group from "Nederland" and Regiment "Norge" led by Hstuf. Thoeny.

Every night, the men of the III. SS Corps engineer units, went out along the defensive perimeter of the bridgehead to lay mines, put up barbed wire entanglements, build palisades and dig anti-tank trenches. It was the engineers who kept the main Narva River bridge intact despite the best efforts of Soviet pilots and artillerymen to destroy it. This bridge, and a secondary one, were protected during the day by artificially manufactured smoke screens.

Following the Soviet failures at Ssivertsi, Merckula, and Kriavasso, the commander of the "3rd Baltic Front," General

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Govorov, turned his attention to the Narva bridgehead. Massive Soviet aerial bombardments of the city of Narva were carried out on the nights of 6 and 7 March 1944, causing great destruction and many casualties. The railroad bridge was destroyed and most buildings in the inner city were reduced to rubble. The quarters of the SS Engineer Battalion 11 on the Petri Square were particularly hard hit. On the night of 7 March, the southern parts of the Narva bridgehead received the brunt of the bombing. At the end of 12 straight hours of air raids, the enemy artillery opened up with a massive, murderous fire. After this ended the city of Narva was truly dead. All of the civilians had fled, while the SS defenders were still firmly dug-in under and around the ruins.

Still, the material damage to the fighting units had been great. Regiment "Danmark" had 34 of its motor vehicles destroyed; its 13th Company had lost one-third of its artillery pieces and its 14th Company had lost two-thirds of its Flak guns. Immediately after the shelling stopped, the Soviets launched their main attack on the bridgehead in the sector of SS Regiment 48 "General Seyffardt"/"Nederland." The regimental commander, Ostubaf. Joerchel, was forced to throw in his last reserves. The Dutch SS battalions literally pummeled the Russians to a halt. When the opportunity presented itself, Ostubaf. Joerchel shifted the offensive. At the head of his troops he led a sharp counterattack that drove the Reds back in disarray. The heroic performance of the SS Rgt. "GS" drew mention in the prestigious Wehrmacht War Bulletin for 15 March 1944:

"In the fighting of the last day in the northern sector of the Eastern Front, the Dutch SS Volunteer Panzergrenadier Regiment "General Seyffardt," under the leadership of Obersturmbannfuehrer Joerchel, particularly distinguished itself."

In addition, Joerchel was awarded the Knight's Cross.

A few days later, the Soviets shifted the focal point of their efforts to the part of the bridgehead front held by SS Regiment 49 "De Ruyter," around Lilienbach. In very hard fighting, communist tanks and infantry broke through the Dutch SS lines. An emergency task force was assembled from 9./"Danmark" and part of Regiment "Norge," to deal with the situation. Ostuf. Sidon led this battle-group in a vigorous counterattack that not only threw back the Russians but regained the old defense lines

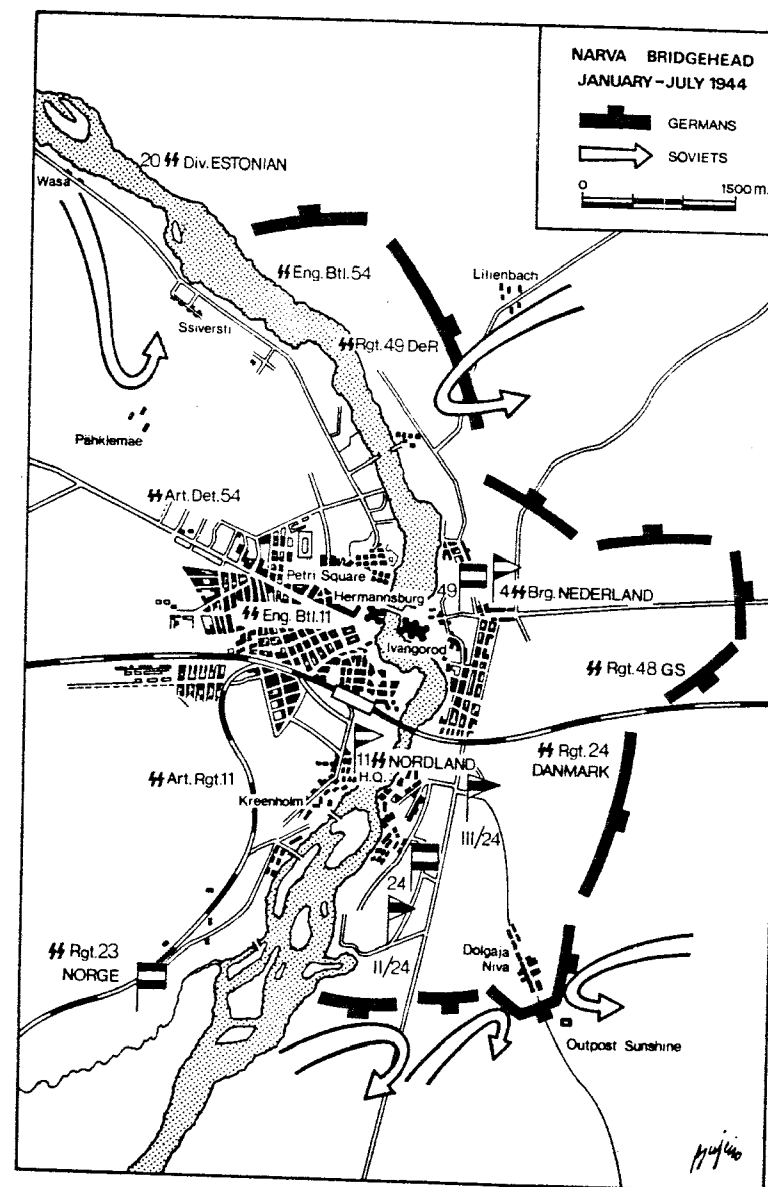
as well. Sidon was badly wounded in the engagement, but won a listing in the Wehrmacht "honor roll" and was awarded the German Clasp of Honor.

Despite these setbacks, the enemy actually intensified the pressure on the vulnerable Lilienbach sector, which was actually a "bridgehead" in the bridgehead, as troops manning the area were exposed to the Soviets from three sides. A large column of communist T-34 tanks broke through the lines, but they were coolly picked off one by one in close combat. At Molkerei, near Lilienbach, relentless back-and-forth fighting raged and Hstuf. Dievel commanding 14./SS Rgt. "DeR," was killed in action. Then the Russians smashed through to the north of the Popovka-Narva road and began driving for the Narva River bridge. "Nederland" Brigade HQ became desperate and a call for help went out. It was answered by 1st Co./SS Panzer Detachment 11 "HvS," under Ostuf. Rott.

The "HvS" "Panther" tanks reached the Narva bridge just before the Reds did. With repeated, energetic forward attacks, the SS tanks were able to halt the enemy armored force. A supreme effort was made by Oscha. Wild's "Panther" platoon which fought the enemy at point-blank range for possession of the bridge itself. It was a nerve-wracking engagement, with both sides exchanging a blistering rate of fire. But in the end the SS tanks prevailed and Oscha. Wild was awarded the Knight's Cross for his heroic actions.

In the "Nederland" HQ, the Brigade commander, Brigfhr. Wagner, personally directed the defensive efforts of his troops for days on end without pausing for sleep. At Lilienbach, after 48 hours on non-stop combat, the SS Rgt. "DeR" was bloodied and exhausted. A series of enemy breakthroughs, counter-attacks and holding actions was being repeated over and over again and the regimental commander, Ostubaf. Collani, the one-time aide to the famous SS General Sepp Dietrich, became worried that his unit would finally collapse under the enormous enemy pressure. After much soul-searching, Collani decided to begin withdrawing his men from the Lilienbach positions.

The retreat of Regiment "De Ruyter" began under cover of darkness on the night of 13/14 March. It was almost a disaster. The enemy was fully alert to what was taking place and Red Army units intercepted many of the withdrawing columns. Merciless combat ensued, with the Dutch SS men literally fighting for their lives. II. Battalion/"DeR" became hopelessly en-



Positions of III. SS Panzer Corps' units in and around the city of Narva and the Narva bridgehead. (Chapters 5 through 10.)

trapped and its commander, Hstuf. Diener was killed. The leader of a neighboring company, Ustuf. Helmut Scholz sounded the alarm and mustered all of the troops he could find for a counterattack. Scholz's men hit the Russians hard and drove them back out of the way, finally allowing II. Battalion to slip through to safety. For several more hours, Scholz and his make-shift battle-group patrolled the entire sector, courageously engaging the enemy wherever he appeared. Scholz went on to become one of the most highly decorated soldiers and youngest battalion commander in the III. SS Panzer Corps. Command of the leaderless II./"DeR" went temporarily to Hstuf. Ertel who was replaced a short time later by Hstuf. Karl-Heinz Fruehauf.

Ostubaf. Collani was able to get his "De Ruyter" Regiment into a new series of positions running in a line from Lilienbach Hill to Teufelswiese to Parkwald. On the morning of 22 March, this line was hit hard by a strong enemy force. 5th Company/"DeR" was heavily engaged and virtually destroyed in vicious close combat. In this sector, 150 Red Army men made a narrow penetration that threatened "De Ruyter's" rear area. To meet this threat, Hstuf. Fruehauf assembled an emergency force from the support personnel at II./"DeR's" HQ. Repeatedly, Fruehauf and his men assaulted the enemy element until it was finally forced to disperse. After another 30 minutes of mopping-up action, the lines were restored. The two officers who had done the most to ease the crisis in the Lilienbach sector were Ustuf. Scholz and Hstuf. Fruehauf. During the night of 14 March, Regiment "De Ruyter" completed digging-in in its new defensive line. For their part, the Reds were too exhausted and depleted to continue the struggle. The same could almost be said of the Dutch SS troops. The battle action on the "DeR" front now switched from close combat to a deadly duel between sharpshooters. This phase of the fighting was adequately described by SS war reporter Eric Kern who was attached to the "Nederland" Brigade, in his classic work, *The Dance of Death*:

"We were lying hard up against the enemy, in places no more than forty yards from their lines. It was a sniper's war...Undeterred by the weather, men stood here and there in the trenches gazing motionless towards the Russian line, sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs, one with the periscope, and the other resting to save his strength for the strike."

"A boy's eyes gazed hard and cool towards the enemy

trench. From the corner of his mouth came the whisper: 'Nothing doing here.' Two men who were walking, bent and stooping, along the trench towards us, straightened a little as they passed and in the same moment a sharp report rent the sodden air like the crack of a whip. We ducked. Who wanted to die in the dreary grey of a wet morning? Again the deathlike silence came down and we went on our way. But the sniper in the front line at Narva stood motionless, gazing into the coming day." pp. 179-180.

For the next few months, the elements of III. SS Corps continued to strengthen their defensive positions. SS Regiment 24 "Danmark" was given a particularly tough sector to defend. Its positions stretched the length of the southern bridgehead ranging from the village of Dolgaja-Niva in the southeast corner to fortified islands in the Narva River to the west. The regimental HQ was on the east bank opposite the township of Kreenholm. The west bank, to the south of Kreenholm, was held by SS Regiment 23 "Norge." The artillery and transport units of the "Nordland" Division were based in Kreenholm, while the divisional HQ itself had been set up in an old Estonian Army barracks to the north of the town.

Dolgaja-Niva, the most southeasterly point on the Narva Front, was held by 1st Company/SS Engineer Btl. 11. The nearest enemy positions were about ½ mile away. At two points in "no-man's-land," about ¼ mile equidistance from both the German and Russian lines, the SS engineers had constructed two forward outposts called "Fir Hedge" and "Sunshine." The outposts served as jumping-off points for raiding parties, (one successful raid carried out from "Sunshine" bore the not quite poetic title of "Operation Stinkfish!"), and as "early warning" centers for the enemy's offensive intentions.

The artillery batteries of "Nordland" and "Nederland" still constituted the bulwark of the defensive effort. Covering the northern part of the Narva bridgehead was the SS Artillery Detachment 54/"Nederland" commanded by Stubaf. Schlueters, while SS Artillery Regiment 11/"Nordland" provided protection for the southern bridgehead sector. To a large extent, the guns of Ostubaf. Karl's SS Art.Rgt.11 were deployed in the woods that lines the west bank of the river just south of Narva. Mixed in with them were the heavy weapons elements 8th, 12th and 13th Companies/Rgt. "Norge." So effective were the SS

gunners that the front line grenadiers fondly referred to them as "our foot Stukas."

On 9 April 1944, Rgt. "Danmark" lost its commander, Ostubaf. Graf von Westphalen, when he was badly wounded by a shell fragment while crossing the Kreenholm bridge. He later died at the Corps' military hospital in Tallinn, Estonia, on 28 May 1944. Stubaf. Kruegel assumed command of the regiment on 10 April. For nearly two more months the military situation remained static, then things abruptly began to change.

On 7 June 1944, the Russians made an unsuccessful attempt to overrun the "Sunshine" outpost of Rgt. "Danmark," but in the fierce fighting the commander of 7./"Danmarck," Ustuf. Berthelsen, was killed. He was replaced by Ustuf. Madsen, a veteran of the old "Freikorps Danmark." The enemy pressure did not let up. At noon on 12 June, the communists began their biggest bombardment yet of "Danmark's" interior positions. Included in the barrage were smoke mortar shells, directed at Dolgaja-Niva, where II./"Danmark" had its command post. The resulting smoke succeeded in restricting visibility, causing a good deal of confusion in the "Danmark" positions.

Seeing that an attack was imminent, Ustuf. Madsen at "Sunshine" outpost, fired off a signal flare directed towards regimental HQ. As the afternoon progressed, the enemy closed in on 7th Company at "Sunshine" outpost. Chaos soon reigned. Part of 7th Company retreated to the command post of II./"Danmark" while another group from it took shelter in the high bush clumps that dotted no-man's-land. A violent battle erupted for the possession of the northern wing of the outpost. Two of 7th Company's platoon leaders were killed in hand-to-hand fighting.

Ustuf. Madsen's signal flare brought results in the form of a pinpoint accurate barrage from SS Artillery Rgt. 11/"Nordland," which disrupted the enemy forces advancing on Dolgaja-Niva from the east. At a point further to the west, about 120 Soviets had broken through, but this force was targeted in on by the heavy weapons companies of "Danmark." Directing their fire was Hstuf. Larum, who stood in plain view on top of an intact factory building and shouted down instructions to his gunners. The small communist penetration force was soon annihilated.

In Dolgaja-Niva, Hstuf. Haemel led II./"Danmark's" staff along with remnants of 7th Company in the defense of the bat-

tal command post which was besieged by around 200 Red Army soldiers. Again, it was the SS artillery fire that broke the back of the enemy force, few of the soldiers in the first Russian assault wave would return to their own lines alive. But the "Sunshine" outpost was largely in enemy hands. It was up to the Danish squad leader, Uscha. Egon Christoffersen, to save the day. Using his own initiative, Christoffersen assembled all of the survivors of 7th Company that he could find in no-man's-land and led them forward in a fierce attack against the communists that now occupied outpost "Sunshine." Christoffersen's small battle-group stormed the enemy positions and regained the old 7th Company trenches. In savage close combat the Reds were expelled from outpost "Sunshine" and the Narva bridgehead front was saved. Hstuf. Haemel immediately pinned the Iron Cross, first class on Christoffersen's tunic. For having heroically bested a far superior foe, Uscha. Christoffersen also received the award of the Knight's Cross a short time later. II./"Danmark" left the following operational report that concisely describes the action on that chaotic 12 June 1944:

"After the deployment of heavy artillery fire and smoke mortars by the enemy against the battalion command post, the enemy troops worked their way to the battalion's positions, being stopped effectively at the positions of 7th Company. Afterwards, the enemy pressed into Dolgaja-Niva, outflanking the forward post "Sunshine" and making Dolgaja-Niva the focal point of the attack. The enemy was driven to cover and halted by our strong points. We had lost 25 men dead with 10 more missing, 2 others had fallen into shock. In our bunkers lay more corpses, identified by the battalion medical officer as belonging to the forward post "Sunshine." It was assumed that the missing men had all perished in their burnt-out bunker; perhaps 3 or 4 men have been taken prisoner. The confused situation permitted little clear overview of what was transpiring. Hstuf. Haemel went into the foremost lines that had been cleared of the enemy in a counterattack by Uscha. Christoffersen and his group.

"At the same time as the Soviet attack on Dolgaja-Niva, groups of about 40-60 enemy soldiers assaulted Natalin and Uskula. These diversionary efforts were easily repulsed. With strong artillery assistance and the help of part of 7th Company, the regimental tank destruction teams

and engineers supported by 2 assault guns, and parts of 9th Company, Dolgaja-Niva and "Sunshine" outpost remained in our hands. Our total losses amounted to 90 dead and wounded and 3 light machine-guns destroyed. Enemy booty taken included one PAK gun (anti-tank), 2 heavy machine-guns and 4 light machine-guns. Ustuf. Koopman, the commander of outpost "Sunshine," was killed in the fighting."

The coming of summer brought with it a number of significant changes for the III. SS Panzer Corps. SS Artillery Regiment 54/"Nederland" was finally fully formed with the arrival of the regiment's II. Detachment, composed of Dutch volunteers, from the SS artillery training school at Beneschau, near Prague. The regiment's I. Detachment, made up mostly of German SS men from the 4th SS Polizei Division, was supplemented with new groups of Dutch troops and remained on front line duty with SS Art.Rgt.54. Around the same time, Ostubaf. Joerchel temporarily left his command position with SS Rgt. 48 "General Seyffardt"/"Nederland" to take a new military instruction course for regimental commanders. He was replaced by Ostubaf. Benner from the 6th SS Mountain Division "Nord," which was fighting on the Finnish Front.

Temporary command of III. SS Panzer Corps itself passed from Ogruf. Steiner to Ogruf. Kleinheisterkamp, a veteran Waffen-SS divisional commander. On the northern Narva Front, Brigfhr. Franz Augsberger, another veteran of the Division "Nord," assumed command of the 20th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (Estonia #1). Kampfgruppe "Kueste" was taken over by Army Oberstleutnant (Lt.Col.) von Buelow when Brigfhr. Kryssing was called upon to become an instructor at an SS artillery training school.

The hot summer weather was further accentuated by persistent enemy aerial fire bombing attacks that left the Estonian towns around Narva in smoldering ruins. The German military situation to the south was verging on the catastrophic, and to the north, it was only a matter of time before Finland capitulated to the communists. Hard decisions had to be made. The German high command in Estonia, known as Army Detachment Narva, had decided that most of the Narva River line had become too vulnerable to defend. Therefore a secondary defensive line was constructed in the hill country of east-central Estonia about 15 miles to the west of the river. These fortifica-

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tions were dubbed the "Tannenberg Positions," and they offered the defenders the joint advantages of high ground dominance and shorter supply lines.

The troops of III. SS Panzer Corps were to occupy the "Tannenberg Positions" when Army Detachment Narva felt the time was right to do so. The defensive lines along the southern reaches of the Narva River, in the thick swamps to the north of Lake Peipus, would continue to be maintained as they were in no real danger. A special division, composed of 4 Estonian police regiments led by SS and Luftwaffe officers, had been formed in May 1944 to guard this sector.

On the afternoon of 17 July 1944, the Soviets again assaulted the "Sunshine" outpost of Regiment "Danmark" in force and succeeded in overrunning some of the positions. These were regained in a savage counterattack by II./"Danmark," led by the valiant Danish Untersturmfuehrer Spleth. Spleth was killed in hand-to-hand fighting but large numbers of Red Army soldiers were killed or captured. Prisoner interrogation revealed that a massive enemy offensive was in the offing. The withdrawal to the Tannenberg line had to be carried out before such an event occurred, so the troops remained in a state of nervous tension waiting to see what would happen first! In any event, the closing act in the struggle for the Narva bridgehead was about to begin.

CHAPTER IX

Withdrawal from the Narva River Front

On 22 June 1944, the Red Army carved a 250 mile gap out of the German Army Group Center. It was a catastrophe of unbelievable dimensions; entire German corps and divisions were completely destroyed. The southern wing of 18th Army, to which III. SS Panzer Corps was subordinated, was attacked on 11 July by the Soviet 2nd Baltic Front. This touched off a general withdrawal to the fortified positions of the "Marienburg Line" that ran adjacent to the railroad lines from Pleskau to Jakobstadt.

The Estonian Front was not particularly affected until 24 July 1944, when some 20 Red Army divisions belonging to the 3rd Baltic Front began their major assault against Army Detachment Narva. In view of this dangerous situation, the planned withdrawal to the Tannenberg Line was ordered to proceed. Actually, preparations for the evacuation of the Narva bridgehead had been in the works since 19 July, and on 23 July the pullback of the east bank forces had actually begun. Still, it was almost too late.

On 24 July, the communists launched a two-pronged attack on the Narva River Front with the object of seizing west bank bridgeheads and linking their two pincher forces together, thus encircling the bulk of III. SS Panzer Corps at Narva. The southern pincher of the attack was actually already across the Narva in the swamp country south of Vaivara. This wing assaulted the positions of 11th Infantry Division with great masses of infantry and tanks but was unable to achieve a breakthrough; the combat hardened East Prussians from 11th Division were more than a match for them.

After an enormous artillery barrage, the northern pincher of the Soviet attack moved across the Narva River at Riigi-Hungerburg. Here most of the defenders were from the 20th Estonian SS Division and they were unable to hold their ground. As this division retreated along the Gulf of Finland seacoast it left wide open the way to the south, thus endangering the great Narva pullback.

To the west, engineers, navy troops and men from the SS

Penal Company 103 (III. SS Corps' "brig" unit), were racing the clock to build up the defenses of the Tannenberg Line. Among the first elements to take up positions in this sector was a battalion from the 6th SS Stormbrigade "Langemarck," composed of Flemish volunteers, that had been rushed in from a training camp in Bohemia where the brigade had been undergoing reformation. Earlier in the year this Flemish SS unit had been engaged in devastating, sacrificial fighting on the southern part of the Eastern Front that saw the strength of Stormbrigade "Langemarck" reduced from over 2,000 men to around 400 in less than three months. On 24 July, the Flemish battalion, commanded by Hstuf. Rehmann, moved into place in an abandoned orphanage building on a hill near Toila. No one could guess that this spot, called "Orphanage" Hill, would become a key point in the fighting that would follow.

"X-Hour" (the hour of evacuation), came at 2330 hours on 24 July 1944. SS Rgt. 24 "Danmark" (less 7th Company) and I./SS Rgt. 49 "De Ruyter" immediately crossed the Narva bridges for the west. Soon afterwards came the SS Rgt. 48 "General Seyffardt" and II./"DeR" covered by 7th Co./"Danmark"; these units fell back only as far as Narva City on the west bank of the river, which they were ordered to hold for another 24 hours. Despite enemy harassing attacks in the previous days, this phase of the pullback went well.

The III. SS Panzer Corps withdrawal scheme had each unit gradually retreating to designated delaying positions before falling back on the new main defensive line. The first temporary positions were at a work camp near Vanakula, which was surrounded by meandering forest land. This was designated "Forward Point A." "Forward Point B" lay between Puhkova and Suur-Soldano near Samokras, with "Point C" at Walge, east of Repikno-Siedlung, and "Point D" at Udria, 1¼ miles west of Lipsu. The different SS units were to fall back on each point in succession, delaying the enemy as long as possible before again withdrawing. It was a risky idea that required perfect timing to avert disaster. Unfortunately, by the later stages of the operation, this precise, systematic program deteriorated into a mad scramble which would spell the doom of one of the Dutch SS volunteer regiments.

The final pullback from the Narva bridgehead was completed by midnight of 25 July, with the last troops reaching Kreenholm via the main river bridge and the railroad bridge. This part

of the withdrawal went unchallenged by the enemy. At 0200 hours on 26 July, Hstuf. Wanhoefer and the men of his SS Engineer Battalion 54/"Nederland" proceeded to ignite the explosive charges that were in place to blow the bridges. As enormous explosions rent the air, the engineers hurried to their quarters in the Petri Square to begin their retreat. But Wanhoefer and his driver stayed behind to survey the destruction. When the smoke had cleared the profile of the main bridge remained visible in the early morning darkness. It was still standing! Horrified, Wanhoefer stood with open mouth as a strong Russian assault force dashed forward and occupied the intact bridge. He screamed at his driver to take him back to Petri Square to assemble a counter task force. But just underway the radiator of Wanhoefer's VW-Kubelwagen "jeep" overheated, and the frustrated Hauptsturmfuehrer and his driver were forced to scramble back on foot.

Fortunately friendly eyes had observed the scene. A rear guard element from an unidentified unit passed on word of the emergency to the staff of the SS Engineer Battalion 54, and then opened up on the enemy attackers with mortar and machine-gun fire. As quickly as they had appeared, the Russians vanished back over the bridge. On the west bank, the trucks evacuating the combat engineers reversed direction and brought back their occupants. Immediately they began unloading crates of mines and explosives to blow-up the bridge with. On the east bank the Red had regrouped and began blazing away at the "Nederland" soldiers. But for their part, the SS engineers, now led again by Hstuf. Wanhoefer, paid no attention to the enemy fire. What they did now or failed to do could decide the fate of III. SS Panzer Corps and the Estonian Front.

Under a steady stream of bullets from the communists, the engineers methodically but rapidly went about their work on the bridge. In a few minutes new charges were firmly in place. The SS engineers ran for cover behind a brick wall. Then the bridge blew high into the air with a tremendous reverberation. The enemy had been denied an easy route across the river.

On the east bank, in the old German bunkers and trenches, the Red Army soldiers went on a looting rampage. But about all they could find were large quantities of propaganda leaflets urging them to desert. These had been left behind by members of the SS War Reporters Regiment "Kurt Eggers," (named after one of their fallen comrades). On 25 July, the Soviet bridgehead



European volunteers from 11th SS Division "Nordland" honor their fallen comrades.

that had been established again at Riigi on the west bank of the Narva River, exploded into action. The troops of the Estonian SS Division that were trying to contain the incursion were plastered with shells of all calibers. The Estonians made a successful limited counterattack that temporarily stopped a Russian breakthrough, but the question was clearly how long could the enemy be held back?

To the west of Narva, SS Rgt. 48 "GS" along with II./SS Rgt. 49 "DeR" and part of SS Rgt. 24 "Danmark" managed to reach their initial blocking positions at "Forward Point A" near Vanakula on 25 July. They were later joined by artillery batteries from Stormbrigade "Nederland." The war diary of 4th Battery/SS Art.Rgt.54/"Nederland" gave this account of the final hours in Narva:

"At 0600 hours heavy shelling began on Narva and the roadways. Incessant air attacks follow. Our command post is in the tower of a spinning-mill south of Narva. Our batteries were fired upon by enemy mortars from the east bank of the river. In a limited area around us many houses are set on fire; soon even the spinning-mill. At 1700 hours comes this command: At 1800 hours all elements must pass back through the grid line 61. In the north, the Russians had established a bridgehead and would soon reach the branch roads."

The bridgehead mentioned in the 4th Battery war diary was the incursion established by General Govorov at Riigi-Hungerburg. By the morning of 26th July it had grown to massive proportions and the Estonian defenders from 20th SS Division had been forced to give ground. The Soviet storm now poured forth into Estonia with all its might. All of the main roads were soon seized by Russian infantry assault groups in sharp fire-fights.

Just before noon on the 26th, Hstuf. Wanhoefer with the last of his "Nederland" engineers took off in 3 trucks down the road to the west. After going less than 2 miles, a soldier noticed movement on an adjacent road to the northeast. He yelled out: "Quick, forward — the Russians are only 1,000 meters away!"

Small columns of dust in the distance confirmed this observation and the engineers roared off at full speed, narrowly missing encirclement.

With a mammoth expenditure of artillery and supporting fire, the Red Army machine rolled forward. All day long on 26 July, German pilots bombed the enemy spearheads in a desperate ef-

fort to win time for the retreating elements of III. SS Panzer Corps. On the Lipsu road near "Forward Point D," two Estonian volunteer companies attached to SS Panzer Detachment 11 "Hermann von Salza"/"Nordland" temporarily organized as Kampfgruppe "Kausch," were heavily engaged by the Soviets. By noon on 26 July, the HQ of KGr. "Kausch" also found itself endangered. The commander, Ostubaf. Kausch, took one look out of the window of his command building and swallowed hard when he saw Soviet troop transports rumbling past. Taking hold of his nerves, Kausch got on the radio and requested help. To the south of KGr. "Kausch," the 1st and 2nd Companies of SS Engineer Btl. 11 had been able to repel a surprise Soviet attack and they now responded to Ostubaf. Kausch's call for assistance. In heavy fighting, the engineers battled their way to Kausch's command post, throwing back the Russians before them. One hour later, the communists began shelling the area (something they always did after their ground forces suffered a serious rebuff), and the commanding officer of 2./SS Engineer Btl. 11 was instantly killed by a splinter from an exploding shell.

CHAPTER X

The Tannenberg Line

Under the code name "Wartburg," "Nordland's" Divisional staff carried out the first phase of its withdrawal from Narva to the Repiknu forest early in the morning of 25 July 1944. By 1100 hours, the new divisional command post was set up and functioning at Saksamaa, about a mile to the west of Vaivara. In the southern areas, the Russians were attacking the retreating SS units with great strength.

SS Regiment 24 "Danmark" reached the railroad line in the Tannenberg positions in the afternoon of 25 July, and was joined by its rearguard 7th Company in the course of the evening. "Danmark's" 11th Company, led by Hstuf. Trautwein accompanied the divisional staff to the Repiknu forest and was sent to hold down the assigned positions for SS Regiment 23 "Norge," which was still en route. After having destroyed all of the bridges in its sector, "Norge" fell back to its designated defensive area along the railroad lines late in the day. The "Norge" engineers had stayed behind preparing booby traps for their pursuers and seeing to it that all intact fortifications were destroyed. Protecting the engineers while they went about their work, were the men of 5th Company/"Norge." This unit reached "Line D" during the evening of 25 July, where it joined up with the SS Armored Battle-Group "Kausch" (based on SS Panzer Detachment 11 "HvS").

At 1700 hours on 25 July, all units of III. SS Panzer Corps were ordered to fall back on "Grid Line 61" (Hungerburg-Soldino axis), with this movement to commence at 1800 hours. Ustuf. Madsen's 7./"Danmark" again acted as the rearguard for the Danish SS regiment and was the last to leave, following the main body of the unit down the railroad lines to the west. On the main east-west highway, well to the north of the rail lines, II. Battalion/SS Rgt. 49 "DeR" and the SS Rgt. 48 "GS" from the Brigade "Nederland," also began the second (and most critical) phase of their withdrawal. The "Blocking Point A" at Vanakula fell to the Soviets soon after the Dutch SS units left and before long a serious situation had developed.

Word reached the commander of Regiment "De Ruyter,"

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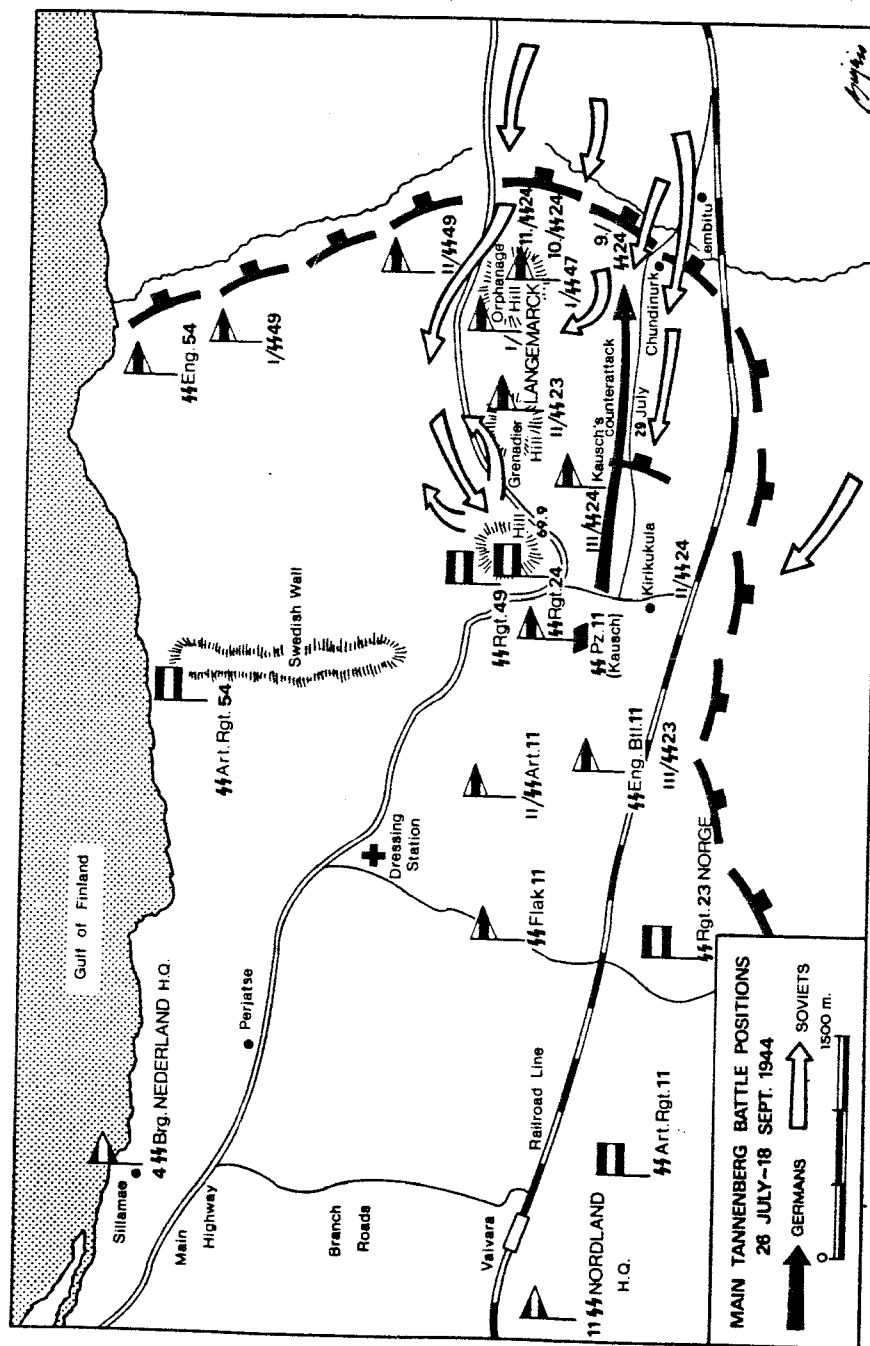
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Ostubaf. Hans Collani, that his II. Battalion may have been cut off. Without hesitation, Collani sent his I. Battalion under Hstuf. Hans Meyer back towards the east to rescue II. Battalion. After some violent skirmishing, II./"DeR," along with SS Artillery Rgt. 54/"Nederland" and 4th Battery/SS Flak Detachment 11/"Nordland," made its way to freedom through the last minute intervention of I./"DeR." Still far behind however, was the SS Rgt. 48 "General Seyffardt"; it did not reach the rail lines until midnight on 25 July, and that left it still far away from its assigned defensive positions.

On the morning of 26 July, the commander of "Nederland," Brigfhr. Wagner, sent his assault gun and reconnaissance companies under Hstuf. Grathwohl to try and assist the SS Rgt. 48 "GS." The "Nederland" soldiers ran right into the middle of an advancing Russian tank force and intense fighting broke out. In furious action, the Dutch Rottenfuehrer (Rttfhr.) Bruins managed to knock out 8 enemy tanks with his assault gun, but Hstuf. Grathwohl's detachment had lost 2 of its own self-propelled guns. "Nederland's" "Reece" company, under Ostuf. Kuhne, became heavily engaged in fighting for the possession of a large farm and was soon struggling for its life. Regiment "General Seyffardt" was on its own; the relief force could not get through!

While their would-be rescuers got bogged down to the west of them, the men of "General Seyffardt" were going through the hell of their last battle. On the evening of 25 July, the regimental commander, Ostubaf. Benner had decided to pause with his main element to wait for the arrival of one his detached companies, which had straggled behind. It was a fatal mistake. A strong enemy force from the north put in a surprise appearance and was able to seize the east-west highway, driving the men of "General Seyffardt" to the south of the road in the process. Ostubaf. Benner ordered his troops to fall back into the nearby forest. The enemy enveloped the area and began drawing in a noose around the woods. The story of the ultimate fate of Regiment "General Seyffardt" is best described by one of the fortunate survivors, Hstuf. Broberg, the commander of 7th Company:

"At 0200 hours on the morning of 26 July, the regiment was at Suur-Soldino awaiting the return of stragglers. But the enemy was pressing forth. Shortly after dawn the Russians penetrated deeply to the north of the



Battle positions along the Tannenberg line west of Narva. (Chapters 10 through 19.)

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road at Vanakula. The Narva-Talinn highway was now being used by strong enemy armored and infantry forces going to the west. Now came our engagement. SS Regiment 48 was mostly in the woods to the southwest (of the highway) when the first enemy vehicles came into view. During the fall back, the regiment was without its provisions and heavy weapons. In difficult, bitter fighting in the forests east of Repiknu, a desperate situation developed. Between 1400 and 1700, the regiment split up into small groups of officers and men, to try and make their way out to the west, but most were killed or fell into enemy hands."

By the morning of 27 July, SS Rgt. 48 "General Seyffardt" had ceased to exist. Ostubaf. Benner and the commander of I. Battalion had fallen to Soviet bullets. 80% of the unit's personnel had been lost. Few of those who fell into enemy hands would ever return alive from captivity. The commander of II. Battalion, Stubaf. Breymann (formerly a company commander in the SS Volunteer Legion "Flanders"), was one of the lucky ones to escape the disaster. The regiment was temporarily removed from the Waffen-SS roles. In the autumn of 1944, Rgt. "GS" was rebuilt from new Dutch recruits and by December 1944 was back in action, fighting independently on the east German Pomeranian Front.

By the morning of 26 July 1944, the first-stage withdrawal had been implemented all along the Narva Front. In the north, the 20th Estonian SS Division and a naval infantry battalion had pulled back to "Line D," and assumed temporary positions that ran from Udria to Repiknu-Siedlung. But by the early afternoon of the 26th, the Soviets closed in on the Estonian soldiers. With heavy weapons fire and close air support blistering the 20th SS Division's positions, the communists were able to make penetrations and in fact occupy part of the designated defensive line.

A similar situation prevailed in the sector of SS Rgt. 24 "Danmark" to the south of the railroad tracks. Here again Red Army units had broken through and seized some of the German defensive lines. This had the effect of cutting off III. Battalion/SS Rgt. 23 "Norge" which was still falling back from the hilly country to the east. Hstuf. Trautwein's 11th Company/"Danmark," which had been occupying the proposed "Norge" positions, was sent out to counterattack the Russian spearheads on



SS-Oberscharführer Derk-Elsko Bruins, SS Anti-tank Detachment 54/Brigade "Nederland." This Dutch volunteer destroyed 8 enemy tanks on 26 July 1944 during a desperate attempt to rescue the hopelessly trapped SS Regiment 48 "General Seyffardt."

the afternoon of 26 July, 11th Company aggressively slammed into the loosely grouped Soviets and flung them back in a short fight, clearing the way for III./"Norge" and restoring the "old" lines. A link-up was made with 20th Estonian Division to the north that effectively sealed the remaining gaps in the front. Moving into the Estonian sector would be the units of the Brigade "Nederland," who would take over their positions. The 20th Estonian SS Division was then shifted far to the south, into unthreatened swampland that bordered the southern reaches of the Narva River. Their new right wing neighbor was the 300th Special Use Division, composed of 4 Estonian border guard regiments.

At noon on 26 July, Soviet artillery fire began raining down on the German held high ground near the main highway. On the receiving end of much of this was the garrison on top of

"Orphanage" Hill, which was titled Kampfgruppe "Rehmann" and consisted of I. Battalion/6th SS Stormbrigade "Lange-marck" and a few odds and ends. "Orphanage" Hill totally dominated the main routes of movement on the roads and plains beneath it, so it had become a prime enemy target. The Flemish volunteers on the hill took shelter in the orphanage building, but it afforded them little protection. Under the ceaseless enemy battering the orphanage building was reduced to rubble. The battalion commander, Hstuf. Rehmann and his adjutant, Ustuf. Swinnen, were both seriously wounded. A little bit later the commanders of 1st and 2nd Companies, Ustuf. von Bockel and Ustuf. van Mol, were both killed and another battalion adjutant, Ustuf. van Leeming was mortally wounded, finally succumbing on 17 August. The command of the Flemish SS battalion finally passed down to Ustuf. D'Haese, who would lead it throughout the critical days and weeks ahead.

CHAPTER XI

The Defense of the Tannenberg Positions

The Tannenberg defensive lines guarded the last approaches to densely populated northwestern Estonia and the capitol city of Tallinn (Reval). Estonia's main east-west railroad lines ran through the southern part of the Tannenberg sector, with a major highway not far to the north of it. The northern part of the Tannenberg Front was marked by readily defensible hills, the most prominent of which was a long stretch of high ground known as the "Swedish Wall." In the center of the front sector were three vital hills that totally dominated the surrounding lowlands. These were (running west to east): Hill 69.9, "Grenadier" Hill, and "Orphanage" Hill. One the south side of Hill 69.9, was the HQ of SS Rgt. 23 "Norge," with the HQ of SS Rgt. 49 "De Ruyter" located on the north side. The ground to the south of the hill was held down by "Norge," with the front line sector to the southwest being manned by the 11th East Prussian Infantry Division.

The Tannenberg Front, which was actually shaped something like a backwards "L," was faced by attacking enemy forces from both the south and east. The disposition of the defending units was as follows: SS Engineer Battalion 54/"Nederland" on the northeast corner to the Gulf of Finland; I./SS Rgt. 49 "DeR" to the south of it running to the north side of the main highway. From the south side of the road on a line running south-southwest, were successively, III./SS Rgt. 24 "Danmark," II./SS Rgt. 24 "Danmark" and III./SS Rgt. 23 "Norge." III./"Norge" linked up with 11th Infantry Division to the west-southwest.

"Orphanage" Hill was still being held by I./"Langemarck" composed of Flemish SS men. There were also some Flemish SS anti-tank guns in position on the north side of "Orphanage" Hill. Hill 69.9 was occupied by some detached Estonian volunteer forces and by 2 companies of combat engineers from the "Nordland" Division. The most exposed section of the entire Tannenberg Front existed at the juncture between Hstuf. Fruehauf's II./"De Ruyter" and Stubaf. Kappus' III./"Danmark"

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which were on the north and south sides of the main highway, respectively.

In the late afternoon of 26 July 1944, heavy enemy shelling began on the sector front that lay between "Orphanage" Hill (I./"Langemarck") and the south side of the central highway (III./"Danmark"). The accurate gunnery, as already noted, severely battered the positions of I./"Langemarck," but it also eliminated the observation post of 13./"Danmark" (heavy weapons company) which had been set up on "Orphanage" Hill. 13th Company's commander, Hstuf. Meggl, was killed in the intense shelling.

The first major Soviet attack on the Tannenberg Front began just after dark in the evening of 26 July. The enemy offensive plan was simple: overwhelm the front line defenses, seize the main road and drive down it to the west. A task force of 5 tanks with accompanying infantry smashed through a naval infantry company that had been given the task of guarding the highway in III./"Danmark's" sector. These new "infantrymen" had been poorly trained and had never seen action (at least on land), before. The communist breakthrough group was able to advance on "Orphanage" Hill and seize the whole east slope of it before coming to a halt. It was a very dangerous inroad.

"Nordland" Division's headquarters staff immediately set counter moves into action. 11th Company/"Danmark" (which had been acting as an all-purpose divisional reserve) and "Danmark's" motorcycle-tank destruction platoon were given the job of dislodging the enemy. After a short procedural discussion, the SS units went on the attack. "Danmark's" tank destroyers achieved the most spectacular results. Silently, carrying personal anti-tank weapons (panzerfaust and panzerschreck bazookas), the "Danmark" troopers crept up close to the enemy armored vehicles. A series of loud explosions, accompanied by vivid burst of flames, rocked the east slope of "Orphanage" Hill, and within minutes every advance communist tank was destroyed. The anti-tank squad leader, Unterscharfuhrer Mellenthin (a 20 year-old volunteer), personally knocked out 7 tanks and disabled 3 others. Mellenthin's successes quickly brought down a heavy enemy mortar shelling on the foremost German positions, but the defensive lines, 300 yards east of the orphanage, had been restored.

At 0600 hours on 27 July, the Soviets started a general bombardment of the entire Tannenberg Front. Shells of all calibers

cascaded down on the positions of III. SS Panzer Corps. The few working armored vehicles of the "Nordland" Division were combined under the leadership of Ostufaf. Kausch, the commander of SS Armored Detachment 11 "Hermann von Salza," and were placed in readiness positions to the south of Hill 69.9 to counter an expected enemy thrust through Regiment "Danmark's" sector. A newly formed unit, the SS Multibarrelled Rocket Mortar Battery 521, directed by Hstuf. Flecke, was brought into firing positions directly behind those of Regiment "Danmark." One of the truck mounted rocket mortars was set up at the command post of III./"Danmark." The component pieces of Hstuf. Flecke's battery were similar to the dreaded "Stalin Organs." Each weapon consisted of six attached mortar barrels that were capable of firing 48 shells in succession at 2 or 3 second intervals, making for a very high rate of fire power!

At 0900 hours a strong Soviet infantry and tank assault force struck the front lines of 10th and 11th Companies/"Danmark," which had been guarding the Tirtsu road. Hstuf. Trautwein, in charge of 11th Company, was badly wounded in the stomach. 30 Stalin tanks and T-34s moved to within 70 yards of 11th Company's trenches. A survivor of the engagement, Uscha. Illum, described what next happened:

"When we saw what was now occurring, we became speechless. The noise of Soviet tanks caused everyone to look up. Coming directly at us from south of the highway were 30 "Josef Stalin" and T-34 tanks!

"We had only one thought: how could we stand up to this great mass of armor? North of the highway, a 7.5cm PAK gun opened fire, but it was too far away to be effective. The tanks came closer and closer. From about 70 yards away their cannons opened fire on our positions. We sprang up and ran for our lives. After these frightening minutes passed, we came to our senses and began aiming and shooting our "panzerfauste." When the first tank went up in flames our old battle spirit reexerted itself and our confidence returned. All over the tanks were bursting into flames and smoke was billowing thickly. After 14 tanks had been destroyed the others turned around and took off for the rear."

A bit later in the day, the communists were able to infiltrate through 10./"Danmark's" positions and effectively cutoff 10th and 11th Companies both from each other and the rest of the



Flemish Waffen-SS volunteer.

German lines. Although totally isolated, the two companies would continue to fight on for the next few days until only a handful of survivors remained. Elsewhere, 9th Company/"Danmark" was pulled out of the regiment's northern wing to intercept an advancing enemy force near Chundinurk. A short time later, violent fighting gripped Chundinurk and spread throughout the sectors of II./"Danmark" and III./"Norge." The entire front of III. SS Panzer Corps was now engaged and the towns of Auwere, Lembitu and Sookula had to be hastily evacuated. The precise and deadly fire of the various SS artillery and heavy weapons batteries continued to prop up the efforts of the weary front line grenadiers.

But the reports coming in from the forward artillery observation posts were unsettling: vast, unending packs of Soviet tanks, charging at top speed towards the west with guns blazing, had been sighted. It was just too much for the "Danmark" troopers to handle. III. Battalion's lines were overrun and the survivors were either desperately fighting for the high ground on "Orphanage" Hill or cutoff and trapped somewhere to the east.

As the Russian juggernaut swept up "Orphanage" Hill, I. Battalion/"Langemarck" under Ustuf. D'Haese grimly joined the battle. Counterattacking in small groups, the Flemish SS men doggedly kept throwing the Red Army infantry off the crown of the hill in hand-to-hand combat. At the foot of the northern slope of the hill, a herculean one-man effort, that became one of the legendary achievements of the Tannenberg battle, was developing. It was here that the young Flemish volunteer Uscha. Remi Schrynen was stationed with his 7.5 cm anti-tank gun. His gun crew had been immobilized and he had already been wounded more than once and was out of contact with the I./"Langemarck" command post. But he saw something that disturbed him: the northern wing of the Soviet assault force was sweeping by to the north and west of "Orphanage" Hill, clearly outflanking the Flemish SS battle-group. Something had to be done, so Schrynen took the initiative himself.

Although in considerable pain, he maneuvered his cumbersome field piece into position and began firing at the enemy. One after another, the 4 lead Russian tanks went up in flames before Schrynen's accurate gunnery. Then 2 tanks, moving side by side, were knocked out by one shot! That was too much for the Reds; they began a hurried retreat. Remi Schrynen had

singlehandedly turned back a full scale enemy attack. But his ordeal was not yet over.

To the north of "Orphanage" Hill, II Battalion/SS Rgt. 49 "De Ruyter" was struggling to hold on to its positions. The commander, Hstuf. Fruehauf had been wounded and his successor was the young Ostuf. Scholz, who had proved his mettle at Lilienbach in the Narva bridgehead fighting. The battalion tank destroyer teams frantically shot up one Red tank after another but still they came on. The situation looked bleak.

At "Nordland's" HQ, Brigfhr. von Scholz decided that the time was ripe for an armored counterattack. He passed on orders to Ostuf. Kausch to get something moving. Kausch in turn, sent Ostuf. Steubben and his force of 12 assault guns out of the central hills to meet the most threatening enemy armored spearheads. It was a good tactical move; Steubben's group was able to set up a skillful ambush that wiped out the foremost communist element and brought back some measure of security to the interior lines.

But to the south of "Orphanage" Hill near Chundinurk, the crisis had intensified. The command post of III. Battalion/SS Rgt. 24 "Danmark," that had been set up in a small group of houses between the railroad tracks and the southern slope of "Orphanage" Hill, was fighting for its life. The battalion staff, consisting of Hstuf. Meier and 19 other men, had become totally surrounded and was desperately struggling to fend off strong enemy attacks. Because of the hopeless circumstances, the only concern of the trapped SS men was that they sell their lives as dearly as possible. A radio distress call was sent out however, and the only other German unit in the area, the badly weakened 7th Company/SS Rgt. 23 "Norge," responded. Attacking from a woodpatch to the northwest of Chundinurk, the Norwegian volunteers were able to break the siege and link-up with III./"Danmark's" command post. Yet another disaster had been averted!

At the southeast corner of the Tannenberg Front, II./"Danmark" led by the redoubtable Hstuf. Heinz Haemel, now had to pay the piper. The battalion's positions were as follows: 5th and 6th Companies were in the main defensive lines; 7th Company — the last 'covering' company to leave Narva — was held in reserve in a "quiet" location to the west of Hill 69.9, while 8th Company was in firing positions around the Vaivara church with its mortar detachment in a gravel pit southwest of Chun-

dinurk. By noon on 27 July, II./"Danmark" was totally engaged and its right flank was seriously threatened. Reinforcements were called for. Soon on the scene was I. Battalion/Waffen-Grenadier Regiment der SS 47/20th Estonian SS Division, that had been badly weakened in the Narva fall back, but was still battle-worthy. Joining them were some survivors from 9th Company/"Danmark." Using these elements, combined with his own command (II./"Danmark"), Hstuf. Haemel made a successful counterattack that cleverly drove the Soviets right into the range of 8./"Danmark's" mortars. The communist forces were decimated and once again withdrew but Hstuf. Haemel was seriously wounded.

While this action was taking place, other Red Army units were able to secure virtually all of the southeastern slope of "Orphanage" Hill. The whole defensive line now hinged on the angle marked by the ruins of the devastated orphanage building. In the ruins, Flemish volunteers, reinforced by some Estonian soldiers from 20th SS Division, were tenaciously hanging on. After many attempts, SS engineers from "Nordland" were able to solidify a defensive line running from the orphanage to Tirtsu where part of III./"Danmark" was still in place.

At noon on 27 July, a staff conference was held at the HQ of SS Regiment "Danmark" on the southwest slope of Hill 69.9. Present were Brigfhr. von Scholz, the divisional commander, Ostubaf. Kruegel, the regimental commander, some officers from SS Engineer Battalion 11 and various staff officers. The decision was made to send out a "storm troop" from 1st Company/SS Eng.Btl. 11 to infiltrate the enemy lines, plant booby-traps and gain intelligence. 1st Company's commander, Ustuf. Arera, pleaded with von Scholz to be allowed to lead the mission. His wish was granted and he then returned to his unit to solicit volunteers.

After some more general discussion of the overall battle situation, in which von Scholz deliberately sought out suggestions of his subordinates, the command conference broke up. Bridghr. von Scholz left to inspect the nearby firing positions of Hstuf. Larum's 13th Company/"Danmark." Just as von Scholz began a discussion with Hstuf. Larum, a heavy enemy artillery barrage began and shells began plummeting into the company's positions. There was a loud explosion near the command post and seconds later, "Nordland's" commander lay on the ground, bleeding profusely from a head wound; a shell splinter had

penetrated von Scholz's skull. He was rushed to "Danmark's" HQ on a plank stretcher for immediate evacuation to the "Nordland" dressing station.

In the course of the afternoon Brigfhr. von Scholz and Hstuf. Haemel (II./"Danmark") were transported first to the field hospital at Kothla-Jarva, and then, on the advice of the "Nordland" medical officer Dr. Riedweg, to the specialist surgery station at Wesenberg. A local supply truck was used as an ambulance and the wounded men were placed on straw mattresses in the enclosed, stifling back of the vehicle. As the journey progressed, von Scholz's head wound began to profusely bleed again and was soon covered with gnats and buzzing flies. Both Hstuf. Haemel and the medical orderly tried to drive them away, but with little success. Von Scholz lapsed in and out of consciousness and talked incoherently at times. Finally he fell silent. When the wounded were unloaded at Wesenberg, "Nordland's" first commander, "Alte Fritz," was dead. Adolf Hitler posthumously promoted him in rank and awarded him the swords to the oakleaves of the Knight's Cross — a very rare honor for an irreplaceable soldier!

The SS engineer "storm troop" that von Scholz had activated shortly before his wounding, returned to "Nordland" HQ about two hours after having left. Their mission had proved to be a failure and one man had been killed. Another plan was drawn up, this time involving the cooperation of I./SS Regiment 47/20th Estonian SS Division. The objective was to regain the lost portions of "Orphanage" Hill from the enemy. The Estonians, with the help of assault guns, were to attack the main Russian lines to the southeast of the hill while two companies from the SS Engineer Battalion 11 used this diversion to launch a two-pronged pincher movement against the Soviet troops on the east slope of the hill.

After about 30 minutes of supporting fire from artillery and mortar batteries set up on the crown of "Orphanage" Hill, the attack got underway at 2200 hours. When the Estonian SS troops, with their supporting assault guns made contact with the enemy, sirens and whistles began sounding from the communist side to alert all of their forces. Soon a series of colored flares arched through the air, indicating that the Estonians had attained their initial objectives, and the SS engineer group went into action.

1st Co./SS Eng.Btl.11, led by Ustuf. Arera moved down the



SS-Hauptsturmfuehrer Hans Haemel, commander II. Battalion/SS Regiment 24 "Danmark."

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north side of "Orphanage" Hill while Ustuf. Schimpf's 3rd Company advanced from the south. The objective was for the two companies to link-up at the bottom of the east side of the hill and move up the slope together, wiping out the dug-in enemy troops. As usual, it was not to be that easy. When 1st Company reached its "take-off" position, it encountered Russians in positions at the base of the hill. With loud shouts of "Hurrah," the SS engineers stormed into the lower Soviet trenches. The communists quickly gave way. The east slope of the hill now came alive with the sounds of exploding hand grenades and chattering machine-guns, as the Red troops above nervously reacted to what was happening below them.

1st Company was now in place for the final assault but 3rd Company was nowhere to be found. Leaving his troops in the charge of Ustuf. Wolf, Ustuf. Arera and two "runners" (messengers), set out to find the 3rd Company vanguard. More signal flares were spotted in the night sky; the Estonian SS men had broken through the Soviet lines and it was time for the engineers to be moving up the hill.

When Ustuf. Arera and his runners came around to the south slope of the hill they saw a group of men before them that they assumed were from 3rd Company. Foolishly, Arera shouted out to them. The other men responded with a spray of bullets! The SS men reacted in turn by hurling back hand grenades. The Russians quickly threw them back and one of them hit Ustuf. Arera in the stomach and exploded. Hurriedly, the runners carried their stricken commander back to the rear area company medical station. Arera was finally rushed to the field hospital at Sanka, where the victims of artillery or shell fragment wounds were treated. His life was saved by the surgeon, Dr. Nagel.

The attack by the Estonian volunteers and "Nordland" engineers that had started with a good deal of promise, now disintegrated. 3rd Company had been forced back to defensive positions just south of the orphanage ruins and Ustuf. Schimpf was killed in the fighting. The Estonian battalion had advanced too far and was extricated only with the greatest difficulty. It later regrouped in the orphanage ruins. Shortly before dawn, the battalion commander led his men out in one last desperate try to clear the south slope of the hill. In furious, close combat groups of Estonians were cut off and captured. By first light on 28 July, the battalion had ceased to exist as such. The surviving

remnants rejoined the Flemish SS men from I./"Langemarck" in the orphanage ruins.

Stunned by the losses to the units in III. SS Panzer Corps, (most were down to half-strength or less), Ogruf. Steiner – back in charge of the Corps – decided to change his tactics. If things stayed as they were, the defenders would gradually bleed to death; Steiner felt that the only hope left was in massing his intact artillery elements and concentrating their fire at the most vulnerable spots. There were no longer enough armored vehicles to be very helpful except in extreme emergencies.

Under the guidance of the Corps' artillery commander, Oberst Kresin, the artillery regiments of "Nordland" and "Nederland," along with batteries of Luftwaffe Flak guns, Navy coastal artillery, rocket-mortars and assorted heavy weapons, were all brought together. New firing plans were implemented. Heavy weapons were to be rapidly concentrated at the most critical spots of the front, and if necessary, moved as quickly as possible from point-to-point to firm things up. The heavy weapons companies of Regiment "Danmark" (8th, 12th and 13th), were placed under Hstuf. Larum's control in an area stretching southeast of Hill 69.9 to Kirkukula while the 8th, 12th and 13th Companies of Regiment "Norge" were assembled together nearby in a similar firing scheme.

What had been happening on the other side? In a very short time the Soviets had reconstructed the bridges over the Narva River and were in fact building new bridges all along the river. Overwhelming contingents of men and material were streaming over the Narva to the west. The 2nd Baltic Front commander, General Govorov was determined to force the situation once and for all. He massed 11 Guards Divisions and 6 Tank Divisions before the Tannenberg Lines with the objective of burying the 4 badly battered European Divisions that stood in their way.

Despite their numbers and equipment advantages, Govorov's troops would prove unequal to the task before them. In some of the most violent and exhausting fighting of the war, the European SS troops would put up a total, superhuman effort that would grind the communists into the dust. What now took place was something out of the Nordic Sagas of yore.

CHAPTER XII

Fighting for Europe

During the extremely brief, temporary let-ups in the main battle, some needed personnel changes were carried out. On the night of 28 July, Hstuf. Bergfeld took over the command of II./SS Rgt. "Danmark," replacing the wounded Hstuf. Haemel. Ustuf. Dall assumed command of Bergfeld's old 13./"Danmark." III. SS Panzer Corps' chief-of-staff, Brigfhr. Joachim Ziegler now took charge of 11th SS Division "Nordland." He in turn was replaced as Corps' chief-of-staff by Ostufaf. Bockelberg.

In the early morning of 28 July 1944, the battle for the Tannenberg positions resumed with great intensity. "Orphanage" Hill, still held by handfuls of Flemings and Estonians, remained a critical point. Part of Stubaf. Scheibe's II. Battalion/SS Regiment "Norge" was now given the tough job of resecuring both the north and east slopes of the hill. Schiebe assembled his assault group from 5th and 6th Companies/"Norge" and part of a naval infantry battalion, in foxholes on the western side of "Orphanage" Hill. After a short artillery barrage, Schiebe's force stormed across the hill towards the Soviet positions. As soon as the men were in the open, the enemy artillery commenced firing with lethal intensity, but still the SS men went forward.

They leaped into the enemy trenches on the hillside and a savage, bloody, hand-to-hand battle raged. Despite their best efforts, the SS troopers could not break through and the attack broke down in a blood-soaked finale. After Stubaf. Scheibe fell wounded, the signal to retreat, carrying the casualties, was given. The soldiers first fell back to the Estonian positions on the west side of the orphanage, but they couldn't hold these. They were driven clear off "Orphanage" Hill by an overpowering, relentless communist counterattack. The only hope lay in reaching the next high ground, the neighboring "Grenadier" Hill. The European volunteers desperately scrambled up the slopes of this hill, then turned to face their pursuers. Fighting shoulder-to-shoulder, Germans, Norwegians, Danes, Estonians and Flemings struggled together against the common foe.

But their efforts seemed hopeless. The enemy tide gradually swept up the east slope of "Grenadier" Hill. A major Soviet effort began developing in this sector, and before long, strong communist battle-groups advanced to the northeast and south-east of the hill. The situation had reached a critical stage. Fortunately, the European SS troops were finally able to form a cohesive defensive line at the crest of the hill that firmly blocked the Red troops who had followed them. After some futile efforts to advance further, the Russians withdrew from "Grenadier" Hill to turn their attention to the German units that now lay exposed to them to the south.

For the troops still fighting to the east of "Orphanage" Hill, the prognosis went from "critical" to "hopeless." The men from 11th Company/"Danmark" along with the regimental motorcyclists and tank destroyers, although completely isolated, still maintained their old trench line with the help of an occasional Stuka foray. Finally, by the morning of 29 July, the surviving defenders had had enough. It would be suicide to stay put any longer and the decision was made to try and breakout to the lines of the SS Regiment "De Ruyter," which was still in place, somewhere north of the main road. This action has been graphically described by Uscha. Illum, from "Danmark's" tank destroyer squad:

"On the next morning (29 July), another strong artillery barrage opened up on our positions. There were more dead and wounded. As a Russian infantry assault got underway, we had only one machine-gun and two machine-pistols left to oppose them. Hand grenades were running short. We counted only 12 combat ready men. Our only hope lay in a desperate defense against the Russian right (to the south); thus began the unequal struggle for the trenches south of the highway. With very skillfully placed hand grenades we held off the Soviets. Then we decided to cross to the other side of the highway to get better protection from their fire.

"On the way, a Soviet tank blocked our path, keeping the road under its gun. Two men were killed on our first fruitless attempt to cross the road. Twice the Soviets yelled at us to surrender, promising us that we would live through the war in 'honorable confinement.' Our last positions were close to the highway and were under growing pressure. On the other side were the positions of SS "Ne-

derland." Rescue was so close to our grasp, blocked only by the enemy controlled road!

"While making an attempt to ascertain the proper direction, Uscha. Mellenthin and Rttfhr. Jorgensen were cut down by Russian machine guns, (both were wounded). Next to me a comrade leaped up, and despite my warning, attempted to make it across the highway. He was shot dead in the middle of the road. A stray shell fell behind us, and I turned to see Mellenthin coming towards me. He had taken some shrapnel fragments and blood was streaming down his head.

"I bandaged Mellenthin as well as I could; already Rttfhr. Jorgensen lay dying with severe stomach wounds. His younger brother was also one of the few survivors. Jorgensen knew he couldn't survive and he pleaded with his brother to have done with it. A short time later there was a shot and a loud cry; Rttfhr. Jorgensen had been finished off in the arms of his brother. Now the younger Jorgensen lost his head, jumped out of the trench and took off in the opposite direction, giving us a diversion.

"We flung our last hand grenades at the Soviet tank and took advantage of the blinding dust. Everyone leaped out and ran for the road. Mellenthin and I were the last to leave just as the Soviet infantry reached our trench. Seven bone-weary men made it over the highway. We reached the "Nederland" trenches; we had succeeded!"

Furious fighting was raging between the main railroad line and the German-held "Grenadier" Hill; the war diary of SS Mortar Battery 521, described the events that were taking place:

"0830 hours — the enemy shells the whole sector. Heavy fire of all calibers penetrates the front line and rear area positions. Our radioman was killed. A breakdown is underway!

"0855 hours — clouds of dust and powder smoke obscure our vision. The word circulates that an infantry attack is on the way, although it is not yet perceptible. Uninterrupted rocket salvos from the mortar battery are launched, although our observers cannot see a thing.

"1000 hours — the attacking enemy with masses of tanks and infantry has broken through!"
The enemy attack force quickly reached the village of Chun-

dinurk which was held at the time by 9./SS Regiment 24 "Danmark." The German artillery forces then opened up with a concentrated, continuous bombardment aimed at the Soviet point. Risking life and limb, "Danmark" grenadiers went after the Red tanks that had broken through with "panzerschreck" and "panzerfaust," and very soon all were either destroyed or driven back. The retreating Soviet tanks passed along the Chundinurk-Kirkukula road, coming quite close to the command post of III./"Danmark," where two assault guns were being held in reserve. Observing the enemy tanks, the assault gun crews decided to set up an ambush. Moving rapidly, they maneuvered their vehicles into position and went to work. Several of the "Stalins" and T-34s were instantly set ablaze and the rest scattered. The two assault guns went after them and hunted them down throughout the next day, eventually accounting for most of them.

After the collapse of the main defensive lines to the east of Chundinurk and around Tirtsu, the hilly country to the north of the Chundinurk-Kirkukula road became a no-man's-land. The detached elements of III./"Danmark" that had been isolated in that sector, now raced with time as they tried to make their way west to safety. The battle soon reached the battalion command post. A call for assistance went out, and 7th Company/SS "Norge," stationed in the woods to the north, again responded. Led by a young, intrepid Norwegian Untersturmfuehrer, 7th Company stopped a Soviet tank thrust that would have cutoff III./SS "Danmark." The Norwegian SS men destroyed all of the enemy armor in dangerous close combat. The only fatality on the German side was Ustuf. Efsen, the adjutant of III./"Danmark," who had been picked off by a sharpshooter.

By noon on 28 July, the enemy onslaught which had started off so promisingly had ground to a halt in the face of the fierce resistance put up by the European SS troops. Some survivors from 10th and 11th Companies of Regiment "Danmark," trickled in from their old spots to the east of "Orphanage" Hill and were put in the new defensive lines. In the afternoon, a mixed platoon was detached from "Danmark" and given the job of retaking Tirtusu, to the east of Chundinurk. A "Panther" tank from "Nordland's" SS Panzer Detachment 11 was attached in support of the platoon. The forward momentum was initially quite good and the "Panther" provided excellent covering fire. But when a Soviet anti-tank suddenly appeared in the middle of

the road and began firing, the "Panther" was forced to withdraw to safety; there were too few of them left to risk losing one foolishly.

When the "Danmark" assault party closed in on Tirtusu, the Red Army defenders suddenly began jumping out of their ditches and running away. The platoon was able to reoccupy the old defensive positions without much of a struggle. But the soldiers soon began to feel quite alone. There was nothing to link-up with to the north, so that flank was left wide open; the other units that were supposed to have come up never materialized. So the small group of exhausted "Danmark" grenadiers found themselves holding down the equivalent of an entire regimental sector. Under enemy pressure, the platoon was forced to withdraw to Chundinurk on the next day.

At 1700 hours on 28 July, 7 enemy tanks with accompanying infantry attacked the town of Lembitu, but the III. SS Panzer Corps artillery immediately began to accurately shell them. The "spotter" for SS Rocket-Mortar Battery 521 gave this report: "Salvos right on target. The positions remain in our hands." At about the same time, the Reds succeeded in temporarily surrounding "Grenadier" Hill. They began throwing attack groups up the slopes, but these were driven back by the precise gunnery of the SS artillery. The Soviets then regrouped on "Orphanage" Hill to the east.

At sunset, 7th Company/SS "Danmark" with 50 men of its own and 20 Flemish SS men from I./"Landgemarck," readied a surprise attack aimed at regaining the crown of "Orphanage" Hill. In the twilight, the assault group left its positions on the north slope of "Grenadier" Hill to move on "Orphanage" Hill from the northwest. As the SS men went forward, the Soviets proved to be waiting for them. The forward momentum of the attack broke down in a bewildering hail of enemy fire and 7th Company's commander, Ustuf. Madsen, was wounded. As the shadows of night descended, the effort was called off; it would be the last attempt to recapture "Orphanage" Hill. Now, after three days of fighting for the Tannenberg lines, the Soviet General Govorov was preparing to make one final, powerful effort to force the situation. 29 July 1944 was to be the day of decision.

On the morning of the 29th, a heavy artillery barrage fell on the eastern "Tannenberg" positions. The Russians objective was clear-cut: seize the ground between "Grenadier" Hill and

Chundinurk and tear open the front. Following the artillery firing, Soviet planes swept in and made repeated bombing runs over "Grenadier" Hill and the nearby German artillery positions. Enemy fighters also flew in low over the battlefield to strafe the infantry trenches. "Grenadier" Hill was soon enveloped in mushrooming clouds of smoke from the bombardment that it had received. Once the airplanes were out of the sky, the massive communist ground attack commenced. Huge tank forces rolled forward followed by endless columns of Red infantry. In the sector between Tirtsu and the main highway alone, 100 communist tanks of all varieties were advancing on the European SS positions. III. SS Panzer Corps' artillery units soon began sending round after round smashing into the Russian forces, causing enormous losses, yet the enemy floodtide still came forward.

To the east of "Orphanage" Hill, small isolated SS hedgehog positions still blocked the communists. For a time, these acted as a "breakwater," but slowly they were eliminated. It was a desperate fight for these brave defenders as they knew that they had little hope of surviving the day. They made every cartridge and hand grenade count and the enemy took punishing losses. Hstuf. Trautwein, the commander of 11th Company/"Danmark," who now led one of the "hedgehogs," had survived one wounding only to finally be shot dead by the foe. His successors were also wounded, one after another. Gradually, the last European SS elements to the east of "Orphanage" Hill, bled to death on this day of battle.

The war diary of SS Rocket-Mortar Detachment 521 kept tab on the morning developments:

"0830 hours: an enemy barrage blankets the whole sector, front and back. The firing positions of the heavy weapons were particularly hard hit. 0900 hours: no further observations were possible. Deployment alarm goes out to the infantry. Attack still not certain.

"0955 hours: about 40 tanks are before our 'blind'; mostly 'Stalins.' We ask support from the '88' Flak Battery. 1000 hours: the enemy attacks in regimental strength along the railroad line. 1020 hours: our heavy weapons stay where they are firing continuously. Position report: enemy breakthroughs were unimportant due to their infantry suffering extremely heavy losses. Rapid, follow-up salvos are requested of us."



SS-Standartenführer Hans Collani, commander of the SS Regiment 49 "De Ruyter"/Brigade "Nederland." Former aid to SS-Obergruppenführer Sepp Dietrich and commander of the Finnish Volunteer Battalion of the Waffen-SS. Collani chose to take his life after being badly wounded and it appeared that the regimental command post would be overrun by the communists. The command post held out and he was posthumously promoted to Standartenführer.

Up on "Grenadier" Hill, Hstuf. Bachmeier with his II. Battalion/SS Regiment 23 "Norge" had the situation well in hand, but his right wing was weak. His command was supplemented by what remained of the Flemish I./SS "Langemarck" and by some Estonians from 20th SS Division along with a portion of a naval infantry battalion. The defenders of the hill had been separated into small groups and in the various burned-out bunkers and trenches, the Flemings, Estonians, Germans and Norwegians, were all fighting their own individual, grim engagements. Orders couldn't get through, so each group of men had to look out for itself.

A little further to the northeast, the enemy storm had smashed head on into the positions of II./SS "De Ruyter" from the "Nederland" Brigade. The battalion was under heavy pressure and most of its officers had been lost, but it did not give way. The unflappable Obersturmfuehrer Helmut Scholz was directing the unit's actions in a cool, calculating manner. On II./"DeR's" southern flank, all of the advancing Red tanks were quickly shot up by brave Dutch and German grenadiers bearing "panzerfauste." The enemy infantry was slaughtered in droves, and even hardened veterans blanched at the sight of the carnage that had been wrought!

Still in position, near the northeast corner of "Grenadier" Hill, was the 7.5 cm anti-tank gun manned all alone by the Flemish SS Unterscharfuehrer Remi Schrynen. He had become a secret guard for the European troops in the northern hills. For three days he had repeatedly driven off enemy tank sorties despite being wounded and completely isolated from his unit. On the morning of 29 July 1944 he was faced with yet another mammoth challenge: 30 Russian tanks were rushing towards him!

Coolly, Schrynen lined up his shells on the ground next to his gun so he could rapidly load them into the weapon's breech. Then, hauling his gun into proper position, he loaded it, aimed, and fired. Quickly he ejected the spent cannister, reloaded and fired again. Then again. 3 "Stalin" tanks were set afire. Working furiously, the young Belgian added another 4 victims. One minute later, yet another "Stalin" tank had met its doom. The rest of the armored giants, many damaged, now fled in retreat before Schrynen's incredible gunnery. The battle raged on further to the northwest and the Flemish "one man army" was now given a wide berth by the Russians.



SS-Unterscharfuehrer Remi Schrynen, anti-tank gunner from the 6th SS Stormbrigade "Langemarch." (Flemish) Awarded the Knight's Cross for his spectacular achievements on the Narva Front. Belgian volunteer.

The major Soviet effort was an all-out attempt to reach the main highway. To this end, a wedge of enemy tanks drove west past "Grenadier" Hill, then turned south. Before anyone had realized it, the hill defenders had been neatly cut off from the German lines. A terrific battle developed near the main highway on the northern approach to Hill 69.9. The area was held down by volunteers from the "Nederland" Brigade and the fighting was described as "merciless." Every bunker and indeed, every square foot of ground was furiously contested by the "Nederland" SS grenadiers.

The battle command post of SS Regiment 49 "De Ruyter" suddenly found itself in the front lines; the enemy was attack-

ing from every side. Ostubaf. Hans Collani, the tall former member of the Fuehrer's bodyguard who commanded Regiment "DeR," personally led his staff in close-quarter combat to repel the enemy. Finally, Collani fell badly wounded and his aide pulled him down into the HQ bunker. With the fight going badly, Ostubaf. Collani chose to end his life rather than fall into communist hands, as the Soviets were not kind to captured SS officers. The tragedy of the situation was that the "De Ruyter" command post managed to hold out against all odds and Collani might well have been saved!

As the Russian breakthrough grew in depth and the plight of the soldiers on "Grenadier" Hill grew ever more critical, the commander of "Nordland" Division's armored detachment, Ostubaf. Kausch, assembled his tanks for a last-ditch counter-attack. The SS armor moved out into a milling mass of enemy tanks and troops and absolute chaos enveloped the battlefield. Up on "Grenadier" Hill, the defenders, after having been bombed and strafed all morning, were now caught in an enormous Russian-German crossfire. Though badly weakened, Hstuf. Bachmeier and the men of his II./"Norge" were determined to hold on and hope for relief. On the east slope of "Grenadier" Hill a battery of naval coastal artillery was still intact. Although the battery radioman had been killed, the gunners kept firing. Their shooting wasn't very accurate but it did keep the tanks away. The Russians kept circling the hill with their armored vehicles, all the while blazing away at the defensive positions. There was a striking similarity to the "wild west" Indians-circling-the-wagon-train tactic! But the tanks were soon drawn off by the appearance of Ostubaf. Kausch's task force. When they withdrew, large groups of Red infantry began moving down the west slope of "Orphanage" Hill towards "Grenadier" Hill.

Violent fighting spread up "Grenadier's" east slope and the resistance gradually began to diminish. But some individuals continued to put up a brave fight. Sturmann Keilert from 5th Company/"Norge," although cut off and all alone, opened fire on the point of a Russian column with his machine-pistol and drove the Reds back. The Soviets immediately radioed for massive artillery support to deal with this impregnable, one-man obstacle. For his efforts, Keilert had managed to bring down yet another murderous barrage on the hill, this time from the west!

Seeking cover, Keilert jumped into a shot-up trench. The



SS-Obersturmbannführer Paul-Albert "Peter" Kausch, commander of SS Panzer Detachment 11 "Hermann von Salza"/ Division "Nordland." Kausch led his unit, combined with the SS Anti-tank Detachment 11, in the Battle of Berlin until his last tank was lost. Captured by the communists, he was put on trial as a 'war criminal' and sentenced to 25 years at hard labor. He finally returned to his homeland in January 1956.

shelling slowly let up and Keilert poked his head out of the ditch. Coming towards him were three Russians wearing German helmets! Keilert waved his machine-pistol and shouted to them: "Come along up here quickly!" Before he could ascertain who they really were, (probably volunteer helpers or "Hiwis"* from Division "Nordland"), they were blown to bits by a stray artillery round. Keilert was also wounded in the blast and absorbed some 15 shell splinters from his eye to his lung. He crawled away and found another bunker more protected from the inferno. Here he joined some of his other comrades, none fit for combat. In the bunker was an Unterscharfuehrer from Breslau who had been shot through the thighs, a Norwegian who was bleeding to death from his wounds, and a young, unwounded grenadier who had lapsed into shock.

On the plains just south of "Grenadier" Hill, a great tank battle was taking place. Ostufbaf. Kausch's small armored force from "Nordland" was fighting an overwhelming enemy on audacity alone. With supreme bravery and contempt for death, Kausch's tank crews turned the tide of battle. They soon drove the T-34s and "Stalins" before them in a wild retreat that sent them streaming back along both the north and south sides of "Orphanage" Hill. Near the gap between "Orphanage" and "Grenadier" hills, the SS tank men found the lonely outpost of Remi Schrynen. The young Fleming had several wounds and his anti-tank gun had finally been knocked out but not before it had accounted for one last victim, now smouldering a bare 50 yards away. There were still 11 burned-out tank hulks on the battlefield within range of Schrynen's field piece. Schrynen was loaded into an armored car and sent off to a rear area dressing station. For his accomplishments at "Orphanage" Hill, he would soon receive the Knight's Cross from Ogruf. Steiner. After the war, Schrynen was held in brutal captivity by the post-war 'Belgian' government for 5 years for being a 'traitor.'

Over on "Grenadier" Hill, a confusing situation reigned, but the Russians began falling back when it appeared that they were being cut off by Ostufbaf. Kausch's successful armored attack. Bodies of their dead and wounded were left scattered all over

* "Hiwis" was the abbreviation for "Hilfswillige" — the anti-communist Russians who served as auxiliaries with German units and wore German uniforms and helmets.

the eastern part of the hill. From above, the European defenders watched in amazement as the enemy retreated. Gradually they reoccupied the east slope where they found nothing but the dead and wounded from both sides.

At Sturmman Keilert's bunker, the retreating Soviets ordered the men inside to come out. Keilert saw no way to escape so he complied; the others did not and were all gunned down by a Russian with a machine-pistol. With 19 other wounded men, Keilert stumbled off into captivity. On the west side of "Grenadier" Hill, Hstuf. Bachmeier reorganized the survivors. Step by step they swept over the hill, picking up all of the wounded and searching through the burnt-out and lifeless bunkers. By the evening of 29 July, all of "Grenadier" Hill was back in German hands.

The fighting began to wind down in the late afternoon. During 3 days of persistent assaults on the Tannenberg lines, the Russians had lost 113 tanks and an enormous number of infantrymen. The once pleasant rural landscape had been turned into a field of craters, littered with the debris of battle. In some of the deeper bomb craters, German assault guns had become marooned and abandoned. Behind the lines the repair and maintenance detachments worked long hours trying to fix disabled tanks and vehicles. Under the cover of darkness supplies and munitions were moved up to the front lines. The German artillery, as Ogruf. Steiner had foreseen, had been the backbone of the defense so far and was particularly effective against massed enemy troop and vehicle concentrations. The German and Estonian Stuka formations (the Estonians had a Luftwaffe Legion), stationed at Talinn, had proven their worth as well when used against the enemy artillery positions. At this point in time, 2 Stukas had been lost in the fighting.

30 and 31 July saw renewed heavy fighting develop in the critical central hill positions of the Tannenberg Front. The European volunteers on "Grenadier" Hill held firm against the communists despite the fact that their visibility was restricted by gigantic clouds of black-gray smoke that had totally enveloped the hill and blotted out the clear blue sky. In the area between Tirtsu and Auwere, new enemy attacks began but they quickly evaporated in the face of withering German artillery fire. But here and there some penetrations were made.

On 30 July, a Soviet assault force led by 12 "Stalin" tanks smashed head-on into the last defensive line of II. Battalion/SS

Regiment 49 "De Ruyter." The battalion commander, Ostuf. Scholz, was in the foremost element leading the resistance and setting an example for his men. Two tanks poked through the lines and approached the battalion command post that occupied the cellar of a ruined building. They were shot-up and destroyed by "panzerfauste" fired from the entrance way! Few of the "Stalin" tanks could gain any ground but even fewer could get back to their own lines. In one knocked-out tank a detailed map was found showing the Russian plan of attack on the Estonian capital of Tallinn.

After the death of Ostubaf. Collani, the command of SS Regiment 49 "De Ruyter" fell into the hands of Hstuf. Ertel, the regimental adjutant. Thanks to his prudent leadership, the beleaguered regiment successfully held together during the repeated, strong enemy attacks on its lines. For the Dutch and German SS troops of Regiment "DeR" the high point of the fighting had come on 29 July 1944. Although heavy combat took place on 30 and 31 July, the impetus of the Soviet assault had clearly weakened.

On 31 July, two enemy attacks on "Grenadier" Hill were hurled back with the whole defensive garrison participating. In the area held by an Estonian SS battle-group, (chiefly the survivors from I./Waffen-Grenadier Regiment der SS 47), supplies and ammunition began running low so a special consignment was organized for them by the staff of SS Regiment 24 "Danmark." The Estonians received a considerable amount of recognition in the III. SS Panzer Corps' war diary for the "rentless fortitude" that they had displayed while under fire.

The stench of the numerous dead bodies that still blanketed the battlefield unburied, amplified by the hot summer sun, permeated the bunkers and made life in them nearly unbearable. But something worse always seemed to come along. For the men up on "Grenadier" Hill it was the diversion of yet another furious enemy attack. Late in the afternoon of 31 July, a 20 minute Soviet artillery barrage raked the defensive positions on the hill. This was followed by a full-scale infantry assault that tore a 300 yard gap in the foremost lines. But Hstuf. Bachmeier was prepared. He gathered together all of his reserves, and at their head, led them in a savage counterattack that flung the Reds back off the hill and restored the lines.

On the morning of 1 August 1944, an eerie silence hung over the Tannenberg Front. The exhausted and battered communist

forces were regrouping and resupplying farther to the east. This lull, combined with increased Russian sea traffic in the Gulf of Finland, caused the brass at Army Detachment Narva HQ in Tallinn to speculate on the possibility of an enemy amphibious operation. Just in case, a German counter-operation, code-named "Sealion," had been drawn up to meet such a contingency. But for the troops of III. SS Panzer Corps, 1 August provided a welcome respite after several days of extremely hard, violent combat action.

The official Wehrmacht communique for 1 August 1944 (for distribution to the news media), paid special tribute to the Tannenberg defenders:

"In the land area out from Narva, the enemy has launched a great offensive and has absorbed high losses. During the past days, the III. (Germanic) SS Panzer Corps under the leadership of General-of-the-Waffen-SS Steiner with the Germanic Volunteer Divisions "Nordland" and "Nederland" and the 20th Estonian Volunteer Division along with the 11th East Prussian Infantry Division, and land-based naval and army artillery and mortar units, has played a prominent role in stopping the enemy in this sector."

On 2 August it was business as usual as hard fighting broke out again for "Grenadier" Hill. Hstuf. Bachmeier's men managed to hold their ground and small enemy inroads were swiftly eliminated by sharp counterattacks. Tank supported enemy attacks on Chundinurk and the railroad embankment were shot to pieces by German artillery. A small breakthrough to the southwest of Chundinurk was rapidly contained by an Estonian volunteer detachment from 20th SS Division supported by II./"Danmark." The personnel of the enemy units involved were all Mongols.

3 August saw renewed, vicious combat for "Grenadier" Hill. One penetration was made but it was successfully contained. During the night, SS Rocket-Mortar Battery 521 accurately zeroed in on the enemy positions with heavy shelling, and as a result the planned communist offensive operations for 4 August could not be carried out. But by 5 August it was the same old story. "Grenadier" Hill was targeted for a weak shelling followed by a Red infantry attack. The difference this time was that the attack was a persistent one; the enemy did not fall back this time because of his heavy losses. Later in the day, the communists finally succeeded in making a dangerous break-

through. At 2300 hours, SS Mortar-Battery 521 was alerted to place its fire on the hill. The heroic garrison commander for "Grenadier" Hill, Hstuf. Bachmeier, who would win the Knight's Cross for his performance, was wounded and the defenders were left virtually leaderless. Only a small group of disorganized reserves were available to try and block the Soviet advance force.

Once again the battle for the Tannenberg Front hung by a thread. This time an unlikely band of heroes emerged: the men of the SS Probationary Company 103. This was the disciplinary unit of III. SS Panzer Corps that was comprised of the "brig" cases led by Ostuf. Kleucker. There was not enough manpower to waste in a lock-up, so all miscreants in the Corps were thrown into this unit. Now they were called upon to save the "Grenadier" Hill garrison. There was no subtlety in Ostuf. Kleucker's attack; 103rd Company hit the Soviets head-on and in brutal, close-combat, knocked them clear off the hill. The tired defenders of "Grenadier" Hill were able to breathe yet another sigh of relief.

At Chundinurk where the HQ of III./"Danmark" was situated, the SS forces regrouped against more Soviet sallies. This area had been threatened since the very beginning of the Tannenberg fighting but had remained firmly in German hands. Now 9th Company/"Danmark," 7th Company/"Norge" and some Estonian SS volunteers had succeeded in building Chundinurk into a virtual fortress. But connections to "Grenadier" Hill needed to be restored and 103rd Probationary Company was called on again to do the job. Supplemented by small groups of men from 10th and 11th Companies/"Danmark" and the regimental staff, 103rd SS Company fulfilled its mission. For distinguishing themselves in this "mopping-up" operation, the soldiers of the 103rd Company were declared "rehabilitated" and received back their old ranks, badges and decorations. They were then used to fill in parts of the badly depleted Regiment "Danmark." 10th and 11th Companies/"Danmark" were both withdrawn to be reformed and they received new Danish commanders, Ustuf. Jessen and Ostuf. Thorkildsen, respectively.

For once, the enemy forces had just about expended themselves to the limit and they were not able to mount any more offensive operations for another week. This gave the European SS troops a chance to bury their dead, restock rations and supplies, and improve their positions. They were not in any condi-

tion to go over on the attack, but for the first time since withdrawing from Narva, they were able to seriously work on building up their defenses. Some personnel changes also took place. Ostubaf. Fritz Bunse, who had led "Nordland's" valiant combat engineer battalion, now became the permanent commander of SS Regiment 49 "De Ruyter." He was replaced as the head of SS Engineer Battalion 11 by Hstuf. Voss.

The following days saw only small, tank-supported nuisance attacks from the communists. On 12 August, the Reds began launching strong reconnaissance raids. At one point 60 Soviet soldiers tried to infiltrate the forward lines on "Grenadier" Hill but they were appropriately dealt with and few returned to their own lines. Elsewhere a 200 man Russian task force broke through the German lines between Lembitu and Sookula only to be totally wiped out by accurate heavy weapons fire. That marked the end of the enemy infantry efforts for some time to come. In the days that followed, the only significant action on the Tannenberg Front came from the daily, violent artillery exchanges between the two sides.

On 19 August, Ostuf. Scholz, who had led II./Regiment "De Ruyter" with such skill and audacity, was injured in an accident and was replaced as battalion commander by Hstuf. Karl-Heinz Ertel, who had briefly commanded the regiment during the most critical period of the fighting. II./Rgt. "DeR" defended a finger-shaped protrusion that curled into the Soviet lines northeast of "Orphanage" Hill. At the end of August, the Russians assaulted this "finger" in their lines with considerable force and made some inroads. But the enemy penetrations were never allowed to consolidate; pin-point shelling and local counterattacks saw to that. Oberscharfuehrer (Oscha.) Walther, who had served with a Luftwaffe Field Division in Narva before transferring into the Waffen-SS, led a "storm troop" from II./"De Ruyter" in a particularly successful action that eliminated a Soviet breakthrough element, restored the lines, and took many prisoners. On 29 August, Hstuf. Otto Petersen became the permanent commander of II./"DeR," replacing Hstuf. Ertel.

The battle for the Tannenberg positions had been marked by an enormous expenditure of men and material by both sides. The whole front, from the Gulf of Finland in the north to the swampy woodlands of the south, had been reduced to a Lunar landscape; a depressing vista of craters and water-filled shell holes. The substantial masonry buildings on "Orphanage" and

"Grenadier" hills had long since been pounded flat into the earth. Whole forests had been reduced to charred stumps. It was perhaps, the ultimate picture of the destructiveness of war.

During the lull in the fighting in August 1944, every effort was made to build up the badly depleted units of III. SS Panzer Corps. Companies that had contained 200 men the previous year and 100 during the battle for the Narva bridgehead, were now lucky to muster 50 men and most had even less. Parts of the Army and Luftwaffe divisions were sent to the west for rest and refitting. SS Division "Nordland" stayed in place but it was fortunate to be able to draw on its sizable field replacement battalion which was stationed in Tolla, Estonia.

In the Narva and Tannenberg fighting, the officers and men of III. SS Corps had performed beyond any ability to measure. In late August the decorations for bravery were finally passed out in large numbers but they seemed scarcely adequate recognition for what their recipients had passed through. In those sun-scorched hills, fields and forests, the young men from Antwerp and Amsterdam, Oslo and Copenhagen, Hamburg and Berlin, Stockholm and Talinn and many different points in-between, had proven themselves to be true warriors of Europe to whom nothing was impossible. In the different SS formations there existed a true comradeship, one that had been formed in the frontlines without national distinctions. For the first time a truly idealistic and united European community existed not as flight of fancy, but as fact, even if only in the combat bunkers of III. SS Panzer Corps. And not even the most prejudiced "establishment" historian can deny that!

CHAPTER XIII

Crisis in Latvia

When the great Soviet summer offensive that was launched on 22 June 1944 overwhelmed the front of the German Army Group Center, units from the III. SS Panzer Corps were rushed south to Latvia to try and prevent the isolation of the Estonian sector. SS Panzer Recce Battalion 11/"Nordland" had been sent via express train in early July to the Dunaberg area in Latvia. On 10 July, this unit, led by Hstuf. Saalbach, took up positions in Jakobstadt and prepared for action, SS Recce Btl. 11 was to be the centerpiece of an attack group whose goal was to reestablish the severed links between Army Groups North and Center. The battalion had been retitled "Panzergruppe Saalbach" for the duration of the Latvian fighting and in this form it consisted of two armored scout car companies, two companies of self-propelled assault guns, one heavy vehicle company and various support elements. By the evening of 14 July, the proposed Army Group North attack force had been assembled from "Panzergruppe Saalbach" and parts of the 61st and 225th Infantry Divisions under the overall command of General-of-the-Cavalry Kleffel.

Hour by hour, the gap between the lines of Army Groups North and Center grew wider and the enemy penetration became deeper. The job for Gen. Kleffel's task force was to close that gap as rapidly as possible. As the most mobile element, SS Pz.Gr. "Saalbach" stayed up front as all times carrying out scouting missions, counterattacks and stop-gap measures to delay the enemy. The individual companies were split-up and sent to wherever they were most needed. Therefore the SS armored elements covered ground all along the front, from the Baltic Sea to the farthest eastern point in the lines. It was not unusual for Saalbach's men to drive up to 70 miles in one night as they raced from one hot spot to the next. Soon both sides were well aware of this "fire brigade." German units breathed easier when it was around and Soviet intelligence would send out the following message more than once: "Attention. Panzergruppe Saalbach is advancing!"

Almost singlehandedly, Pz.Gr. "Saalbach" prevented the



SS-Brigadefuehrer Juergen Wagner, commander 23rd SS Division "Nederland."

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communists from reaching Riga on the western Latvian sector. The battalion protected the Latvian capital from the southwest to the seacoast, forcing the Soviets to drive further to the west towards Tukums. But the southern part of Army Group North had begun to crumble. To the east of Dunaburg, the Heavy Panzer Detachment 502 had been fighting a desperate but losing delaying action against the Soviets.

Suddenly it was all over; the Wehrmacht panzer troops could hold up no longer. The Reds swept into Dunaburg with massive tank forces. The remnants of Panzer Detachment 502 had to pull out so fast that they left all of their wounded behind – a tragic mistake! The wounded German prisoners, including the commander of 2nd Company/502 Panzer, Oberleutnant Carius, were gathered together by the Soviets. Slowly and deliberately, commissars went among the German wounded and captured and began killing them one-by-one with a bullet in the nape of the neck. Oberleutnant Carius, still clutching his mapboard, calmly awaited his turn. Then instead of shooting him, the communists asked him to explain his maps. Thus his life was spared while all of his comrades were executed. Later Radio "Moscow" would broadcast the names of all the famous "Tiger" officers who had been "dispatched" (murdered), at Dunaburg. This was yet another war crime neglected at Nuremberg!

1 August 1944, a small Soviet forward element broke through between Autz and Mitau near Tukums and drove all the way to the seacoast. This had the effect of physically cutting off Army Group North from the south. To save the desperate situation, the hard-driving Generaloberst Ferdinand Schoerner was placed in charge of Army Group North. Immediately, Schoerner began mustering his forces to save the front. The well-known panzer leader Generalmajor Graf Strachwitz was ordered to build up an emergency tank force to go to the relief of Riga. He was given 10 tanks and 15 assault guns with the mission of breaking through to the Latvian capital and holding on to its defenses. From the air he would be supported by the famous "Stuka Pilot," Major Hans Ulrich Rudel, whose squadron was already wreaking havoc on the enemy tank forces.

As the communists moved against Tukums, another emergency armored force was being constructed at the SS troop training grounds of "Seelager" at Dondangen, Latvia. Here the SS Panzer Training and Replacement Regiment was combined with the SS Panzer Reconnaissance Training Detachments 1 and

2, to form a new SS armored brigade. The brigade commander was a tank officer from the 1st SS Panzer Division "Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler," Ostubaf. Martin Gross, and as was the case for most ad hoc Waffen-SS units, the brigade bore the commander's name as its title. At the port of Windau on Latvia's far southwest coast, vehicles and troops which had been rushed from Germany, were quickly unloaded.

On 8 August 1944, SS Panzer Brigade "Gross" began a thrust towards Tukums supported by some provisional armored platoons that had retreated from that city. The enemy forces proved too powerful and the attempt failed as did an effort to link up with General Kleffel's battle-group to the east. The brigade was therefore subordinated to Generalmajor Strachwitz's task force for a major, combined unit counterattack. Strachwitz began his powerful effort on 20 August 1944, and the German tanks swiftly overran the surprised enemy outposts and drove right into Tukums. Offshore, in the Bay of Riga, the German heavy cruiser "Prinz Eugene" provided invaluable support for the ground offensive; its heavy guns destroyed a concentration of 48 enemy tanks in the Tukums market place, which considerably lessened the resistance to Strachwitz's attack. From Tukums, Strachwitz stormed forward with a small armored group to successfully make the link-up with Riga.

SS Panzer Brigade "Gross" continued the attack eastwards. Along with supporting infantry, it reached the Doblen-Autz road on 26 August. At the village of Janiarauniki part of the SS Grenadier Battalion "Runge" was detached from the brigade to maintain defensive positions on the prominent Hill 50, nearby. For command purposes, this battalion was subordinated to the 174th Infantry Regiment of the 81st Infantry Division.

Elsewhere, in southeastern Estonia, another dangerous situation was developing. On 12 August 1944, the Soviets broke through the Modohn positions 30 miles to the west of Pleskau. The divisions manning the southern defensive wing had managed to escape, but the divisions holding the line from the south part of Lake Wirz to the town of Walf, had begun to crumble. Army Group North now transferred all of the points still held between Lakes Wirz and Peipus to the control of Army Detachment Narva. On 16 August, a major communist attack began against the last German reserves in that area. Major Rudel's Stuka Group, working frantically, temporarily brought the enemy advance to a halt, but 30 divisions of the 3rd Baltic

Front were now massing against weak German defensive forces. The Russians had also begun to move north towards Dorpat (Tartu) in Estonia. 4 Soviet Guards divisions, 1 tank division and 2 motorized brigades attacked the line held by the weak German-Estonian 207th Security Division that ran between Lakes Wirz and Peipus. In arduous fighting, the 207th Division was virtually destroyed and the road to Dorpat was open.

To try and save Dorpat, the staff of III. SS Panzer Corps assembled an emergency battle-group under the direction of Brigadefuehrer Wagner, the commander of the "Nederland" Brigade. Wagner's task force was put together from bits and pieces of "Nordland" and "Nederland" which were deemed expendable. On the night of 15/16 August, the rapidly formed Kampfgruppe "Wagner" left the Tannenberg sector to take up its assignment at Dorpat. The larger part of the "Nederland" Brigade remained in position and was now under the temporary command of Oberst Freidrich. Among the components of Kampfgruppe "Wagner" were the last contingents of "Nordland"/"Nederland" tanks and assault guns as well as a new 450 man motorized battalion from the Belgian 5th SS Stormbrigade "Wallonien," which had only just been deployed along Estonia's northern coast, west of the Tannenberg line.

On 16 August at 2100 hours, II. Detachment of SS Artillery Regiment 54/"Nederland," led by the Dutch Hauptsturmfuehrer de Veer, left the Johwi railroad station to join Kampfgruppe "Wagner" in Dorpat. On the same day, the 25th Soviet Amphibious Brigade landed near Mehikourma within German lines on the west shore of Lake Peipus, adding more complications to an already difficult situation. Kampfgruppe "Wagner" actually bypassed Dorpat itself to build up a defensive line south of the city. Joining the battle-group's forces were Estonian civil guardsmen (wearing identifying armbands), and the survivors of the decimated 207th Infantry Division, which had been composed half of Estonians and half of Germans. Placed in the foremost positions were Grenadier Regiment 23/11th East Prussian Infantry Division, I./Stormbrigade "Wallonien," III./Mortar Regiment 3 and II./Artillery Regiment 58.

The Panzergruppe "Strachwitz," which had been fighting around Riga, was moved by rail on 20/21 August to the Estonian Front, arriving at Elwa, south of Lake Wirz, on 23 August. Strachwitz's tanks, along with those of SS Panzer Brigade "Gross" and the SS Panzergruppe "Saalbach," were sent im-



SS-Untersturmfuehrer Leon Gillis, anti-tank gun battery commander in I. Battalion/5th SS Strombrigade "Wallonien." Awarded the Knight's Cross for his courageous actions near Dorpat that saved the front lines. Belgian volunteer.

mediately to intercept the advancing Russians at the south point of Lake Wirz. Generalmajor Strachwitz was killed in action, personally leading the counterattack. The tank battle that took place was described as "fearful," but it proved inconclusive.

Everywhere the enemy was advancing with overwhelming forces. On 19 August, the "Wallonien" Battalion led by Ostuf. Leon Degrelle, the Belgian political leader, was engaged in a hard battle against the wedge of a Soviet assault force at Patska. With the help of 4 tanks, the Walloons hung on to "Windmill Hill" at Patska and were able to block the enemy advance. But the thin front had been punctured at many points. 13 miles to the east of Dorpat, Estonian soldiers and the men of the Fusilier

Battalion 11/11th Infantry Division, were engaged in heavy defensive fighting. On 20 August, II./SS Artillery Regiment 54, was sent to help them out.

It was a tough battle and the Estonian troops could not hold on to their positions but Fusilier Battalion 11 stayed in place. Ustuf. Horstmann's 4th Battery from II./SS Art.Rgt.54 provided excellent supporting fire, expending some 350 shells in 40 minutes with deadly precision. The Russians fell back in panic leaving more than 200 dead on the battlefield. 15 artillery pieces and 13 heavy machine guns belonging to the enemy were also destroyed. But the Soviets came back later in still greater force. In the face of fresh mass attacks, the fusiliers and SS artillerymen were forced to retreat to new positions near Meliste.

On 21 August, Brifghr. Wagner inspected part of the front in the vicinity of Dorpat. The Soviet attack groups were moving north along the west shore of Lake Peipus and along the road from Werro to Dorpat. Advance units had reached the village of Kambi. Somewhat earlier, Wagner had dispatched Degrelle's faithful "Wallonien" Battalion to Kambi to again block the enemy's route. The Walloon volunteers had fortified the town with heavy weapons and had blocked off the north-south road with 3 anti-tank guns. The positions were formidable enough to dissuade the communists from making a frontal attack; instead they began probing the "Wallonien" Battalion's flanks.

On 21 and 22 August, the Walloon SS men were able to throw back the enemy probing attacks, but on the 23rd it was a different story. The Soviets had been able to take the town of Noo which gave them a good line of advance on Kambi. This in turn threatened the main road to Dorpat, and if the Soviets could breakthrough the Wallonian positions astride the road, Estonia would be their for the taking. The onus of defending the road fell on the shoulders of a small Belgian SS battle-group led by Ustuf. Leon Gillis. Gillis had placed his 3 anti-tank guns directly in the road as if challenging the Soviets to do something about it. The enemy responded with violent infantry and armored attacks, each one of which was repulsed by the brave Walloons. But in the fighting the anti-tank guns were destroyed and most of the defenders were wounded. As the Reds regrouped for another attack, Ustuf. Gillis was left with a crucial decision. He could withdraw to save his small command — that was the logical thing to do, but then the road would be handed on a platter to the foe and all the sacrifices of the defenders

would have been in vain. Gillis rejected that notion; he chose to counterattack instead.

With great elan, the Walloons, wounded and well alike, charged down the road and flung themselves at the enemy. In furious, close combat the communists were forced to give way. The remaining three enemy tanks were knocked out at close range by hand grenades, an extraordinary feat in itself. The front had been saved, and Ustuf. Leon Gillis was later awarded the Knight's Cross for his leadership performance. The "Wallonien" Battalion command post also received a congratulatory phone call from Brigfhr. Wagner.

On the next day, (24 August), the enemy pressure continued unabated. The Walloon SS troops were called upon to hold the high ground at Kambi at all costs. With help from Major Rudel's Stukas they did their best, but it wasn't enough. Two huge Soviet tank columns moved in on Kambi, and Ostubaf. Degrelle and his soldiers were forced to fight their way out of an impending encirclement. They retreated to the northwest and took up new positions south of the Embach River. That night, Degrelle led his 4 SS companies in a counterattack that drove back the pursuing Russian spearhead, but losses were high.

Advancing towards Dorpat from northeastern Latvia were the SS Panzer Brigade "Gross" and the Panzer Brigade 101. On 24 August they reached the vicinity of Elwa and Noo in Estonia. Nearby the Panzergruppen "Strachwitz" and "Saalbach" joined the battle at a point north of Tamsa. The Russians were pouring everything that they had into the fighting. On the evening of the 24th they were able to sever the last connections between Army Detachment "Narva" and 18th Army near the south shore of Lake Wirz. The Soviet objective was now to drive rapidly for Pernau on the Bay of Riga to isolate the German troops in Estonia.

SS Panzergruppe "Saalbach" soon became the striking force for Kampfgruppe "Wagner." Again it split up into small armored segments which travelled off to wherever danger threatened. On 25 August 1944, the battle for Dorpat began. Parts of the 11th Infantry Division along with I. Battery/Assault Gun Brigade 393 and the Estonian Civil Guard, put up a bitter resistance, but they could not stop the communists. At 1800 hours the red flag went up over the old university city, but the airport was still being defended by 5th Company/SS Panzergruppe "Saalbach." This company, led by Ustuf. Behnke, de-

spite facing mass enemy attacks from all sides, refused to budge. Its 7.5 cm swivel-mounted guns swept like the scythe of death through the Red infantry, and the communists finally gave up their efforts to secure the airfield. After dark, 5th Company withdrew to safety.

Having seized Dorpat, the Soviets spread out to the west and east of the city and were able to throw small bridgeheads across the Embach River to the north. Due west of Dorpat, near the village of Noella, the volunteers of the "Wallonien" SS Battalion fiercely resisted the enemy. There would be no further breakthroughs here! To the east of Dorpat, small Estonian units, supported by II./SS Artillery Regiment 54, still held firm, but the artillerymen were preparing for a withdrawal.

The Soviet goal was to join both of their bridgeheads north of Dorpat, then seize the highway and rail lines running to Tallinn. On 25 August the way north seemed to be free. Fleeing in that direction were large groups of frightened civilian refugees, Estonian guardsmen and German transport and rear echelon troops. Little or nothing was in place to oppose the Soviets. Trying to deal with this confused situation, Brigfhr. Wagner worked without sleep scraping together small, combat-worthy units to throw into the battle.

The "Wallonien" SS Battalion was ordered to relocate from Noella to the high ground north of Dorpat. Ostubaf. Degrelle set up blocking positions, manned by his Belgian volunteers, at Parna, Lombi and Keerov. He gathered together all of the men that could possibly be used in the front lines, including the lightly wounded, transport drivers and clerical workers. But it still wasn't enough. Despite their inadequate numbers, the Walloons stayed in place. In the evening of 25 August, the battalion's last anti-tank gun was finally destroyed in an unequal duel with Russian tanks, and Ustuf. Gillis, the inspiration of the "Wallonien" defensive effort, was badly wounded.

Meanwhile, the armored vehicles of SS Panzergruppe "Saalbach" continued to go from one crisis point to another. At Haage, near Dorpat, an Army artillery and Flak detachment was trapped and surrounded by the enemy on 26 August. Late in the day, 5th Company/Panzergruppe "Saalbach" led by Standartenoberjunker Schwarck came to the rescue with an "armored cavalry" charge. The remainder of "Nordland's" SS Panzer Detachment 11 "Hermann von Salza," also swung into action against the advancing Soviet tanks near Dorpat. Hstuf.

Schulz-Streek led the last 13 assault guns from this unit in bitter fighting on 26 August. Before the day was done, all of the unit's officers save two had been killed, and the communists were still moving forward.

In the last days of August, the most effective defensive barrier was the fortified line that the "Wallonien" Battalion had built on the high ground that ran from Parni to Lombi to Keerdu. All day long on 30 August, the Soviets launched an attack on the Walloon SS lines every half-hour, and each attack was driven off. Nothing could get through these brave Belgian volunteers. Three times their courageous, superhuman efforts were recorded in the official war diary of the III. SS Panzer Corps. Finally, on 31 August, with the front stabilized, the Walloons were withdrawn from the lines. Of the 260 Belgian volunteers who had gone into action on 30 August, all but 32 had been killed or wounded. Out of the battalion's original strength of 450 men, these were all that remained!

The "Wallonien" contribution had been pivotal in preventing any major enemy breakthrough. As a special -- and unique recognition of this fact, Ogruf. Steiner saw to it that every Belgian SS man who survived the fighting (more than 200), received an Iron Cross decoration. Steiner also visited the battalion's survivors and spoke to each man individually, giving them his personal thanks. In a moving leave-taking, that was not to be forgotten by any of the participants, Steiner gave an address to the battalion on the theme of their role in the united European effort against communism and concluded with this remark: "One Wallonian is worth 1,000 ordinary soldiers!" The battalion was then reincorporated into the new 28th SS Panzergrenadier Division "Wallonien" which later fought with great heroism on the east German front. Ostubaf. Degrelle was awarded the oakleaves to the Knight's Cross for his battalion's performance at Dorpat.

Despite the loss of Dorpat, Brigfhr. Wagner's stop-gap measures had worked brilliantly and had prevented the collapse of the southern Estonian Front. The communists were unable to exploit their initial penetrations. The positions of SS Kampfgruppe "Wagner" were finally taken over by relief troops from II. German Army Corps. To the east of Dorpat, a new Estonian SS battalion (III./SS Regiment 46), composed of veterans of the Finnish Front, was inserted into the front lines. On 31 August, this battalion, along with Estonian police troops and

German tanks, launched an attack on a Soviet bridgehead across the Embach River. By 1 September, the enemy incursion had been totally eliminated. The Embach River then became the main defensive line. By early September, II. Army Corps with the assistance of Hstuf. de Veer's II./SS Artillery Regiment 54/ "Nederland," was able to improve its positions around Dorpat to such an extent that the Russians gave up on any further offensive undertakings in that sector.



SS-Sturmbannführer Martin Guertz, commander III. Battalion/SS Regiment "Norge." Posthumously decorated with the Knight's Cross for supreme heroism in the Latvian fighting.

CHAPTER XIV

The Evacuation of Estonia

On 16 September 1944, the 3rd Soviet Baltic Front decided to probe the weakly held German lines that lay between Dorpat and Lake Peipus in preparation for a "final offensive" on Estonia that hinged on the surrender of Finland. The Red assault troops were able to grab many favorable launching points for the big attack. On 18 September a full-scale Soviet drive began on Mustuee, to the northwest of Lake Peipus. SS Panzer Recce Battalion 11/"Nördland" (formerly Panzergruppe "Saalbach"), immediately intercepted and blocked off the enemy point elements. But a new, more ominous phase in the struggle for the Tannenberg positions had begun.

At this point in time, Adolf Hitler still favored maintaining an Estonian bridgehead at all costs to protect the eastern Baltic shipping lanes. He was prepared to sacrifice III. SS Panzer Corps for this purpose. Both Ogruf. Steiner and Generaloberst Schoerner (commander of Army Group North), had argued against this, indicating that they now felt the long-term defense of Estonia was untenable. The German forces in Estonia had also been weakened by the transfer of the motorized sections of 11th Infantry Division and the entire 20th Estonian SS Division to Germany for reformation.

Despite orders to the contrary, Generaloberst Schoerner placed III. SS Panzer Corps and the whole of Army Detachment Narva on alert for imminent evacuation. It had also been accepted in the higher command circles of the Waffen-SS that Estonia would be given up, so a major effort was underway to salvage as much Estonian manpower as possible before the ultimate withdrawal. As the rumors of the German pullout circulated, Ogruf. Steiner was confronted by agitated Estonian military leaders in his III. SS Panzer Corps' HQ near Tallinn. Generalmajor Sodla, inspector of Estonian volunteer forces and Colonel Sinka, inspector of the Estonian self-defense guard, participated in this unpleasant conference. Sinka accused Steiner of condemning the Estonian people to death by agreeing to evacuate the country. Steiner could only reply that alternatives were not available and that he would personally see to it that the

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maximum number of refugees would be evacuated from Tallinn and other seaports.

The withdrawal operation began immediately, without the sanction of the Wehrmacht High Command, on 14 September 1944, coinciding with the first phase of the planned, massive Soviet offensive. On that same day, Generaloberst Schoerner flew to Hitler's headquarters in Rastenburg, East Prussia, to have his moves legitimized. He expected resistance and possible dismissal from command, but he got neither. The Fuehrer was aware that Finland was preparing to capitulate, an act that would absolutely doom the defenders of Estonia, so he agreed to the pullout. Under the code-name "Operation Tree Bough," the evacuation was officially on.

On the evening of 15 September, the orders reached III. SS Panzer Corps and already developed plans for loading the transport columns were set in motion. Final disengagement of the combat troops would not be finished however until the night of 18/19 September. The withdrawal was to be carried out rapidly but not at the expense of caution. III. SS Panzer Corps units were to head for the port of Pernau in small assembly groups on 19 September from temporary positions to the east of Wesenberg. II. Army Corps would stay in its defensive position until the 19th, when it too would fall back. The capital city of Tallinn would be held by a mixed battle-group until 22 September 1944, when it also would be evacuated, in this case by sea.

At 1800 hours on the evening of 18 September, the units of III. SS Panzer Corps began implementing their pre-arranged marching orders. SS Regiment 24 "Danmark" led off the retreat, falling back unit by unit on an agreed upon time schedule. By 2000 hours, most of the other elements of "Nordland" and "Nederland" had also joined in the withdrawal. The artillery and heavy weapons groups had assembled on the Konju road and their columns began moving westward.

II. Battalion/SS Regiment 49 "De Ruyter" under Stubaf. Petersen was the last unit to leave the Tannenberg positions; its rear was given protection by part of II. Army Corps. SS Regiment 23 "Norge" had marched on foot from Vaivara to Sillame, where it was loaded into waiting trucks. SS Regiment 24 "Danmark" was delayed by the failure of motorized transport to appear in its embarkation area. This meant that the rearguard 6th Company might have to fight its way out. 6th Company remained behind on Hill 69.9, while regimental machine-pistol

and engineer platoons stayed in place on "Grenadier" Hill. These platoons had the unenviable job of blocking off any enemy pursuit force. To accomplish this end, small groups of volunteers were scattered throughout the old defensive sector. 13th and 14th Companies /"Danmark" (heavy weapons), kept up a supporting fire for the rearguard until they ran out of ammunition at 2030 hours. Thirty minutes later they joined the other Danish SS elements en route to the west.

At 2200 hours, 6th Company finally withdrew from Hill 69.9, leaving only Hscha. Christensen's engineer platoon and Hscha. Schwabenburg's machine-pistol platoon still in position. At that point, these two Danish volunteer platoons became the easternmost German elements on the entire Eastern Front. But that proved to be a short-lived distinction; the platoons withdrew without incident at 2300 hours. Small-scale enemy harassing operations soon got underway. As the troops from "Danmark" and "De Ruyter" crossed the bridge south of Sillame, (blowing it up afterwards), continuous explosions and bursts of flame illuminated the night sky in the distance.

During the morning of 19 September, "Nordland" and "Nederland" reached Kothal-Jarwe and by midday were in Wesenberg. The SS men were given plenty of wine, schnapps, cigarettes and special rations as they disembarked in the small villages around Pernau, principally because such items would have otherwise been destroyed or left behind. The SS Field Police now took charge of the evacuation columns to insure security and order. To the south of Division "Nordland," the 11th East Prussian Infantry Division finally reached Estonia's west coast after traveling 90 miles without a pause, which put quite a strain on the horse-drawn artillery sections! The 20th Estonian SS Division (with the exception of III./SS Regiment 46), had already reached the Latvian capital of Riga. From there it was shipped to Germany and arrived at the Neuhammer SS training grounds in Silesia later in September. The Estonian part of III./SS Regiment 46 had chosen to remain in Estonia, with most of the volunteers going underground to carry out a guerilla war against the communists that lasted well into the 1950s.

The Estonian Frontier Guard Division, known as the Special Deployment Division 300, had trouble withdrawing from its positions north of Lake Peipus on the Narva River. This division had only been in existence since May 1944 when it was assembled from the staff of the destroyed 13th Luftwaffe Field Divi-

sion, 4 Estonian frontier guard regiments, some assorted artillery batteries and a German "Jaeger" (rough terrain) battalion. With 17,000 troops, 300th Division was easily the largest unit in the Narva sector, and it was subsequently given the most ground to cover.

To maintain its long front, 300th Division was broken down into two strong brigades known as the "North" and "South" Brigades. Two 18 mile railroad spurs along with an 18 mile log road connected the positions of the twin brigades. As the 300th Division began to form up for its withdrawal on 18 September, it found itself coming under intense Soviet pressure. When the division commander, Generalmajor Hoefer, received word that Red Army forces had broken through the Embach River line east of Dorpat (which in any case, was no longer being defended), he hastily implemented his retreat plans.

Brigade "North," led by the Danish SS-Obersturmbannfuehrer Englehardt, immediately began pulling back along the log road to the west. Along with it went the Estonian Frontier Regiment 6, which was nominally attached to Brigade "South." The rest of Brigade "South" was following the coast road along the north part of Lake Peipus. At 1800 hours, the entire division (less one regiment), began moving out in a column that stretched for 15 miles. The infantry regiments each used 384 one-horse carts and 16 four-horse carts to carry their supplies and equipment. The use of such conveyances would result in problems of a fatal nature. The situation was described as follows by one of 300th Division's officers:

"At 2100 hours I left my HQ with my staff to fight my way through the traffic. On the log road where the Brigades "North" and "South" came together there was absolute chaos. No one had known that half of Brigade "South" would be using this road. In the night of 18/19 September, from 2200 to 0200 hours, there was no rest, as every unit was obliged to battle it out for a place on the road. As most of the Estonians didn't understand German, a considerable amount of pushing, shoving and kicking went on. In addition, the small Baltic horses kept falling down and getting stuck in the swampy ground."

The only units providing protection for 300th Division during its initial pullback on 18 September, were the SS Recce Detachment 11/"Nordland" and an SS rocket-mortar battery deployed along the west shore of Lake Peipus to the south of

300th Division. Stubaf. Saalbach's assault guns from the SS Recce Detachment 11 were kept fully engaged trying to intercept the forward spearheads of the Soviet attack force. At the same time, 300th Division was making painfully slow progress on its journey around the northern bend of Lake Peipus. After turning south, the division finally crossed over the Pungerja River bridge, and still at full strength, prepared to begin the final portion of its retreat. To protect the main body of the division against the threat of enemy envelopment, three battle-groups, led by German officers, were formed. These detachments were to operate separately in unprotected areas, while the bulk of the division went on its way; one of the 600 man battle-groups was commanded by Ostubaf. Englehardt.

On 19 September, after ceaselessly turning back enemy penetrations from Riga to Dorpat, the SS Recce Battalion 11/"Nordland" had finally reached its limits. The Soviets had gotten through at Mustvee and Torma and could no longer be stopped. To save his command from elimination, Stubaf. Saalbach was forced to order a retreat. This was bad news for the slow-moving 300th Division. In the wooded swamps along the Pungerja River it was attacked by part of the VIII Estonian-Soviet Guards Corps, which was a Russian puppet formation filled with Estonian communists under the command of Lt. General Pern.

Estonians in German uniforms, led by Germans, now battled Estonians in Russian uniforms led by Russians! But the Bolshevik 2nd Storm Army had more in its arsenal to back up "its" Estonians. As other Red Army units moved in, 300th Division became fatally caught in the pinchers of a giant vise. Escape became impossible; the greater part of the division disappeared in the swamplands, with only a few elements (including Ostubaf. Englehardt's battle-group), making it to safety. For the most part, the survivors who weren't captured would fight in the Estonian resistance movement for the next several years.

It didn't take long for enemy pressure to build against the units of III. SS Panzer Corps that were now concentrated in western Estonia. A race to the seacoast was developing. Pernau, Wolk and Wolmar still blocked the communists, but they could not hold out for long. To the west of Wesenberg on 19 September, 5th Company/SS Recce Btl. 11 stood guard over the rear area. Later in the day it joined the entire battalion in a further retreat. At 0900 hours on 20 September, 5th Company's com-

mander, Ustuf. Schirmer, received orders to hold open a bridge until a convoy of 10 assault guns had passed safely over. Once that transpired, an engineer platoon attached to 5th Company would blow the bridge. Schirmer deployed his company, with its cannon wagons and scout cars, along both sides of the bridge road and in nearby farm fields.

After a nerve-wracking wait of two hours with no assault guns putting in an appearance, the roar of tank motors could be heard across the river. Suddenly, Russian infantry appeared up and down the east bank of the stream. A fire-fight broke out. Schirmer urgently radioed battalion HQ for instructions. The reply he received was: "Hold to your orders!" Ustuf. Schirmer then went over the bridge to see exactly what was coming. One of the expected assault guns lumbered into view followed by two others that were trying to lay down a covering fire. Right on their tail were four Soviet tanks. As the first assault gun rolled over the bridge, the enemy infantry fire increased in volume. Quickly, the other two armored vehicles also crossed, with the officer in the last one shouting out: "Blow up the bridge, we are the last ones. The other seven tried to breakthrough to the north despite a radio warning."

Just as the first enemy tank started to enter the bridge, the structure was blown-up by SS engineers and 5th Company retreated under a blistering fire from the communists. All over western Estonia the combat engineers worked hard destroying railroad lines and bridges. Oil refineries and strategic factories also were demolished. In the Estonian capital of Talinn, Generalmajor Gerok assembled a bridgehead defense force from a variety of units from different armed services as well as the Estonian Home Guard. The Soviet attack on Talinn began on 21 September just as transport ships arrived in the harbor to evacuate the soldiers. Exactly at noon on the 22nd, two torpedo boats took out the last of the defenders and the Red flag went up over Talinn where it has remained ever since. But 80,000 soldiers and refugees had been safely removed from the city in a very successful operation.

For three days, a small bridgehead had been maintained around the port of Pernau by I. Battalion/SS Regiment 49 "De Ruyter" and other Dutch SS elements led by Stubaf. Bunse. During this time, substantial numbers of troops were steadily taken out by ship through Pernau's harbor facilities. The defensive line held by the Dutch SS troops ran along the Pernau

River, with foot patrols made on the opposite bank. Once the majority of the soldiers had been shipped out through Pernau, the remaining "Nederland" elements began a landward march to the southwest. The Dutch volunteers travelled through large, often malarial forests, which contained numerous small villages. Covering the retreat of the "Nederland" Brigade was the dependable SS Recce Battalion 11/"Nordland" and Kampfgruppe "Bunse." Also joining in this pullback were the 30th and 61st Infantry Divisions from II. Army Corps.

On the morning of 24 September, the SS-Kampfgruppe "Petersen," (composed largely of Stubaf. Otto Petersen's II. Battalion/SS Regiment 49 "DeR"), crossed the Lemmer River south of Pernau and started down the coast road to Latvia. The journey turned out to be a hazardous one, as unknown to anyone, Soviet tank and infantry forces had broken through to the coast and were waiting for the withdrawing SS troops. What followed therefore, was a desperate, but successful breakout battle conducted by II./SS 49 with the help of 4./SS Art.Rgt. 54, which also served as a part of Kampfgruppe "Petersen."

To clear away the tanks that were blocking the road, individual soldiers with panzerfaust bazookas were sent out. In furious, close-quarters fighting the following members of II./SS 49 claimed victims:

Staff – II./SS 49

Rttfhr. Straptin	2 tanks
Uscha. Seifholz	1 tank

5th Company

Uscha. Schuur	3 tanks
Rttfhr. Kist	1 tank

7th Company

Ustuf. Teunissen	1 tank
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8th Company

Strm. Rieger	1 tank
Uncredited anti-tank gun	2 tanks

4th Battery/SS Art.Rgt.54

Ustuf. Hortmann	1 tank
Uncredited anti-tank gun	1 tank

Total tank kills:

13 out of 20 deployed by the enemy.

The Red tanks that survived this determined onslaught were driven off, some of them damaged. After crossing the bridge at Haynach (and destroying it afterwards), the main enemy thrust

was left behind. A battalion adjutant with a few volunteers now served as the rearguard for Kampfgruppe "Petersen." On the morning of 25 September, after a day and a night of unforgettable peril, Stubaf. Petersen's battle-group reached the relative safety of the coastal highway on the Estonian-Latvian border.

Also providing protection for the units of III. SS Panzer Corps as they relocated to the south, were the weakened divisions of the battered 28th and 50th Army Corps. These corps had been maintaining a north-south defensive line from Walk to Wolmar, but now they were on their last legs. The juncture between the two corps had been torn open and the commander of 50th Corps, General Wegener, had been killed in action. One division of the corps, 21st Infantry, had been totally smashed and existed only as a small battle-group. Assigned to its aid was the SS Flak Battalion 11/"Nordland." Working side-by-side with the surviving infantrymen from 21st Division, the SS Flak Battalion 11 was instrumental in enabling the battle-group to withdraw safely to the southwest in the face of stiff enemy pressure. For their heroic actions during this time, Ostubaf. Walter Ploew, the Flak battalion commander, and Ostubf. Holzboog, the chief of 4th Battery, both received the German Cross in Gold.

In the first ten days that the communist fall offensive had raged, the German 18th Army in Latvia and Estonia had lost the equivalent of 10 to 18 divisions, which were replaced only by small battle-groups made up of the survivors. This catastrophe had been brought about by the great inequality between the opposing forces. In addition, the German units had all been understrength to begin with and had no reserve and resupply capacity to speak of. In contrast, the Soviets had more of everything than they could even begin to use! Thanks to the United States of America, the Russian communist forces, were fully motorized, in possession of a fully modern communications system, and for the first time in the history of the country, had a complete portable rations capacity. With the United States on its side, the Soviet Union did not have to worry about feeding itself, a factor which otherwise would have brought the communist state to a total collapse sometime in 1942 or 1943.

Equally important, the West bestowed upon the communists all of the weapons and munitions for a massive army that they could not produce for themselves. This enabled the Soviets to

field some 70 Guards Divisions, 2 Tank Corps, and a plethora of smaller independent motorized and armored formations on the Latvian Front alone. These units were now forming up for a massive drive towards the Latvian capital of Riga.

The III. Soviet Guard Corps led the offensive on Riga, attacking between the Misa and Kekava Rivers. In this embattled sector the I. German Army Corps struggled to build an emergency bridgehead across the Kekava River. As they arrived from Estonia, the units of III. SS Panzer Corps were fed into this bridgehead. 11th SS Division "Nordland" had crossed the Latvian-Estonian frontier at noon on 21 September 1944. On the morning of 22 September it took up battle positions 18 miles north of Riga, only to receive new orders to relocate to a new "blocking" area southeast of the city, in the afternoon. As the "Nordland" transport columns got underway again, they had to continuously dodge powerful explosions from the relentless enemy aerial bombardment of the Riga vicinity.

CHAPTER XV

Latvian Battles

By the evening of 22 September 1944, the regiments of "Nordland" Division had been deployed in the forests laying between the Duna and Kekava rivers. III. SS Panzer Corps' HQ was set up in the city of Tigurgas with "Nordland's" command post established in Gulbji. All day long, five German divisions had been struggling to defend the approaches to Riga against mammoth, fresh Soviet forces. "Nordland," 225th Infantry Division and parts of 11th Infantry Division and 14th Panzer Division were now brought into the battle.

As usual, the Waffen-SS soldiers were called upon to lead a counterattack. On 23 September, SS Regiment 24 "Danmark" was ordered to launch an attack with two primary objectives: 1) seize the villages of Lidakas and Vaci, and 2) clear the enemy out of the woods along the east bank of the Kevava River. III. "Danmark" was to attack on the regimental left wing from the northeast of Lidakas, while II. "Danmark" would advance on the right wing from the northeast of Vaci. Once these two towns were taken the "Danmark" battalions would link-up. Supporting "Danmark's" drive would be tanks and assault guns from 14th Panzer Division while 13th and 14th Companies/ "Danmark" (heavy weapons), were to stay in interception positions to safeguard the flanks of the attacking units.

The other elements of "Nordland" would enter into the fighting as the situation developed. For the interim, SS Regiment 23 "Norge" was positioned in a densely wooded area between the villages of Dekmeri and Katlapji to the east of Regiment "Danmark's" positions. The few remaining tanks and self-propelled guns of "Nordland" were grouped around Senbergi for use in a supporting role. Further north, at Tici, the I. Detachment/SS Artillery Regiment 11 had moved into place. To the northeast of Division "Nordland," on the other side of very dense, impassable forests, were covering forces from the 11th and 225th Infantry Divisions. These troops were also given the task of taking the Cempulli-Baldone road to prevent a Soviet tank brigade in Baldone from using it for a flank attack.

During the night, all units took up their battle readiness posi-

tions. 23 September 1944, dawned with a brilliant, fiery sunrise in the east. At precisely this moment the command post of Regiment "Danmark" was humming with activity as the Luftwaffe and artillery liaison officers conferred with the staff to coordinate the support they would supply for the coming attack. The discouraging word arrived that the tanks of 14th Panzer Division were late in getting to their assigned positions, but the regimental commander decided that the attack would proceed on schedule anyway. At precisely 0930, the companies of II./"Danmark" (Hstuf. Bergfeld), and III./"Danmark" (Hstuf. Ternedde), swung into action. The enemy quickly gave ground. III. Battalion charged into Lidakas and secured the town in a brief but exceedingly bitter hand-to-hand fight. 6th and 11th Companies were then ordered to clear the last few hundred yards to the Kekava River. But this proved difficult to accomplish since enemy machine gunners and artillerymen had the area perfectly targeted.

For a time the attack momentum had been brought to a halt. Emboldened by this, the communists regrouped for a counter-attack with fresh troops. Fortunately for III. Battalion, eight tanks and assault guns from 14th Panzer Division now put in an appearance. They were just in time to meet the first wave of the vigorous Soviet attack force. A violent battle raged, but after some worrisome moments the Russian infantry finally broke down and fled into the woods in a wild retreat. But the tense atmosphere remained.

A protracted artillery duel between the two sides began, and the "Danmark" grenadiers were left in the position of being unable to advance or to retreat. The Soviets reassembled their infantry and made sporadic attacks, without too much enthusiasm, until around 1300 hours. The Germans were able to call in Stukas, and with the help of these fierce dive-bombers, the attack was put back on course. Hstuf. Ternedde placed 6th and 11th Companies/III. Battalion into reserve and continued the advance with other companies from his battalion in the lead. With close support from 14th Panzer Division a considerable amount of ground was gained, but the enemy was so strong in numbers that counterattacks were always feared.

On both sides the heavy weapons continued to roar. For the first time enemy planes appeared over the battlefield. On the ground a tank duel had developed, with 14th Panzer Division losing two of its own while knocking out four enemy ones. By



Dutch volunteers taking the Waffen-SS oath of loyalty. At the podium is the Dutch General H.A. Seyffardt, former Chief-of-Staff of the Netherlands Army and a committed National Socialist. After his murder by leftist terrorists on 5 February 1943, Seyffardt's name was bestowed upon the Dutch SS Regiment 48/"Nederland."

1700 hours both sides had had enough and the fighting sputtered to a halt. Extremely heavy casualties had been given and taken. Regiment "Danmark" counted some 300 of its soldiers killed or wounded. During the night, the last regimental reserves, including the machine-pistol platoon, the signals platoon, the emergency company and an assortment of transport personnel, entered the lines around Likakas to bolster "Danmark's" positions. The regimental commander, Ostubaf. Kruegel, was worried about what awaited his troops on the next day. He wasn't sure that his tried command could hold out in the face of fresh, concentrated enemy attacks.

24 September began with a heavy exchange of fire all over the "Danmark" sector. The communists began their expected attack but it proved to be very weak and was easily repulsed. In the afternoon the artillery took over and began a desultory shelling that lasted for the rest of the day. The next day, 25 September, proved to be a day of rest for Regiment "Danmark," but there were ominous signs of significant troop movements taking place behind the enemy lines.

In the meantime, the rest of Division "Nordland" had also been in action. SS Regiment 23 "Norge" had been carrying out its own independent operation. At 1400 hours on 23 September, "Norge" had attacked along the Dekmeri-Katlapji line towards the east. The regiment was supported by "Nordland's" surviving tank section from the "Hermann von Salza" Panzer Detachment, which moved in concert from Blunavas in the north against the dangerous spearhead of a Soviet tank brigade. In brutal fighting, the communists were driven back into the dense forests and then began withdrawing to the south. But the Germanic SS troops were too quick for them.

The Russians soon found themselves caught in a dangerous trap. From the north, the field pieces of I./SS Artillery Regiment 11 placed a devastatingly accurate fire on them, while to the east, parts of the 11th and 225th Infantry Divisions blocked off all escape routes. SS Regiment "Norge" was advancing on them from the west. The "Norge" attack went forward at a rapid pace along the floor of the vast Latvian forest. But the resistance began to stiffen. The narrow wooded lanes had gotten jammed with Red Army infantry and tanks that no longer had any room to retreat; therefore they had to stand their ground and fight.

For the first time the men of "Norge" spotted "Sherman"

tanks that had been thoughtfully provided to the communists by the Americans. These tanks, along with some "Stalin" models, fought back furiously. A bitter struggle raged with both sides taking heavy losses, but with grim persistence the SS men drove home their attack. One by one the enemy tanks were destroyed, either by anti-tank guns or by terrific individual effort. By day's end, the Russians were barely holding on. On the German side, 11th Company/"Norge" had lost its valiant Norwegian commander, Ostuf. Sondborg, who had been killed in action.

On 24 September the assault continued with Regiment "Norge" making further gains. Unterscharfuehrer Petrat from 10th Company made a brave but foolhardy attack on a "Stalin" tank. He was gunned down by a hidden enemy machine-pistol as he approached his prey. The Soviets threw in still more tanks only to lose them all again. 10th Company/"Norge" suffered the most on this day of battle, losing its commander, Ostuf. Dirks wounded and a platoon leader, Hscha. Stolz, killed. The regiment's advance was finally brought to a halt by strong enemy heavy weapons fire that came from positions that had been cleverly concealed with tree branches.

25 September saw Regiment "Norge" regroup and continue its attack, even though it was being battered by substantial enemy mortar and artillery fire. Fortunately the Red forces were nearly spent; they could no longer stop the onrush of the stalwart European volunteers and by evening, Regiment "Norge" had attained all of its objectives. The Dekmeri-Asenbergi line was reached and the Soviet armored salient, containing the better part of a tank brigade, had been wiped out. The major town of Baldone was only a short way off, but "Norge" no longer had enough strength to attempt its capture.

On 26 September, the new battle lines that had been won by "Danmark" and "Norge" were solidified and a link-up was made between "Norge" and the elements of 11th and 225th Infantry Divisions that held the high ground to the east. During the early morning hours of this day a crisis developed when a strong Soviet detachment made a quick, surprise penetration through the positions of III. Battalion/"Norge." The battalion commander, Hstuf. Martin Guertz, did not lose his nerve. He calmly gathered up all his reserves and personally led a sharp counterattack that drove out the enemy. In the midst of the fighting, Hstuf. Guertz was killed, but his example spurred

men on. It was 11th Company/"Norge" with the help of supporting fire from Ostuf. Ahlf's 12th Company/"Norge," that finally reestablished the old lines. For III. Battalion's fine performance under pressure, Hstuf. Guerz was posthumously awarded the Knight's Cross.

Having done their job by stabilizing the lines to the southeast of Riga, the regiments of the "Nordland" Division were now relieved, but only to be sent to a new hotspot. The withdrawal roads southwest of Riga that serviced the retreating units of Army Group North were now threatened by strong enemy forces. So III. SS Panzer Corps was sent back through Riga to this area for new deployment around Doblen, a few miles from Tukums. Part of the Regiment "Danmark" was quartered in barracks buildings in Mitau, where only two years earlier some of the "old hands" who had served with the "Freikorps Danmark" had also been billeted.

En route to their new positions, the European volunteers travelled through the abundant grain fields, swamps, forests, solitary farms and clean villages that marked this part of Latvia. Everywhere civilians and labor companies were working frantically to build tank traps, trenches and fortifications. The citizens of Latvia were voluntarily mobilizing for the final defense of their homeland. At precisely midnight on 27 September, the main body of III. SS Panzer Corps reached its assembly area northwest of Doblen.

On the next day, Division "Nordland" took up positions between Putna Krogs and Karmaca on the road to Jaunpils (where Corps' HQ was established), to the northwest of Doblen. Brigade "Nederland" was situated to the southwest of Doblen around the town of Lemkini. After a peaceful day on 29 September, heavy enemy artillery shelling began on the 30th along with reports of large scale communist troop movements. The Reds soon began some "testing" skirmishes to probe the German defenses. Gaps were found to exist in the southern Latvian sector and soon the Soviet forces began racing towards the port of Libau. To keep pace with the enemy, the Germans were forced to make some hasty withdrawals. The elite Panzer-Grenadier Division "Gross Deutschland" was immediately pulled out of the Doblen sector and dispatched to the Autz region to the southwest. "Nordland" and "Nederland" were not far behind as they too received relocation orders.

On the night of 6 October 1944, the last elements of III. SS

Panzer Corps left Doblen for Autz. The only thing that mattered was to stop the enemy advance at all costs. To the north of Moscheiken the center of the defensive effort was maintained by the hurriedly assembled "Point Group Schaefer," under the command of Ostubaf. Max Schaefer, III. SS Panzer Corps' engineering officer. This emergency battle-group consisted of the engineer battalions from "Nordland" and "Nederland" along with the Panzer Recce Detachment 11/"Nordland," III. SS Corps' "Alarm" Company, and I. Detachment/SS Artillery Regiment 54/"Nederland." On 7 October, "Point Group Schaefer" was assigned to defend the sector south of Rubas to the Vadakalis River. On the battle-group's right was the 32nd Infantry Division and on its left was the 201st Infantry Division; both of these Army formations were fighting for their lives.

Problems arose when Ostubaf. Schaefer's men tried to occupy their designated positions. To get to them, the SS soldiers had to cross a dense swamp and expel a communist infiltration force that had slipped through the lines. The operation started off slowly then was called off in mid-course when a strong enemy breakthrough was made on the left-wing of 201st Infantry Division. Group "Schaefer" was ordered to block off this new inroad. The SS troops laboriously turned about to meet this threat. At 1600 hours the battle-group's armored cars and artillery batteries had reached new firing positions near Aswisi-Bugisi. About one hour later at 1700 hours, the Reds made a substantial penetration through 32nd Infantry Division's sector on Group "Schaefer's" right. With enemy soldiers flowing by on two sides of them the SS men were forced to hastily retreat to the south of Micini to save themselves. Once in position here, the Dutch SS artillery gunners were able to temporarily drive back the Soviet vanguard elements.

On the afternoon of 9 October, a massive Soviet armored attack pushed the German lines further back at all points. The next day found the men of Group "Schaefer" in new positions deep in a thick forest. During the afternoon, the loud rumble of enemy troop carriers could easily be heard. The SS soldiers got ready for action. At 1500 hours, some 600 Red infantrymen assaulted the makeshift defenses manned by SS Engineer Battalion "Nordland"; the attack was broken up by the supporting fire from the "Nederland" artillery batteries. Nearby, II. Detachment/SS Artillery Rgt. 54/"Nederland" had been assigned to assist the artillery regiment of the 32nd Infantry Division.

For the next few days these gunners gave a good account of themselves as they layed down a steady fire on the enemy concentrations. By 14 October, the immediate crisis had ended and the Russian drive towards Libau had been brought to a complete halt. At this time Group "Schaefer" rejoined III. SS Panzer Corps in positions around Skuodas and Preekuln.

The SS engineers were put into combat reserve while part of "Nordland's" Recce Battalion was deployed in support of a regiment from 14th Panzer Division. In other developments, the SS Rocket-Mortar Detachment 521, which had performed so splendidly in the Tannenberg fighting, had to be disbanded due to a lack of ammunition. The detachment's personnel were sent to reinforce the SS Regiment "Norge." During the week of 6 October to 13 October 1944, Army Group "North" was occupied with carrying out "Operation Thunder," which was simply the occupation of the western Latvian province of Kurland and the evacuation of the rest of the country. The objective was to shorten the German Latvian Front to enable it to survive. This was a sound strategic move that certainly paid off in the months to come; the Kurland Army would never be defeated on the battlefield.

On 13 October 1944 the Duna River bridge to Riga was blown up and the Latvian capital was abandoned to the communists. On the same day the last units of 18th Army retreated from eastern Latvia to join the German 16th Army in Kurland. By mid-October, Kurland had been totally isolated. The Russians controlled the Baltic coast from Schaulen to Memel with a force of 29 Guard Divisions and 8 Tank Brigades. Surrounding the Kurland Pocket were an additional 31 Divisions and 5 Tank Brigades from the 6th Guard and 51st Soviet Army. The commander of Army Group "North," Generaloberst Schoerner, drew up plans for an immediate desperation breakout attack to East Prussia to be spearheaded by III. SS Panzer Corps and General Busse's I. Army Corps. The plan was presented to Hitler, but he rejected it. He wanted no more retreat in the East. The job of the Kurland Army for the remainder of the war would be to tie down as many Red Army troops as possible, and its success in this regards can never be questioned!

CHAPTER XVI

Kurland Front

SS Division "Norland" entered the threatened southern sector of the Kurland Front on 12 October 1944. As night fell, the flames from Latvian villages put to the torch by the communists could be seen all along the front lines. For those civilians left behind in Soviet-occupied Latvia a reign of unrelenting terror had begun. Militarily, the enemy had but one single-minded objective: take Libau, the last major Latvian port, at all costs. This goal would be pursued relentlessly, but without success, until the end of the war.

The SS Stormbrigade "Nederland" was deployed to the south of "Nordland" next to the 11th Infantry Division in an area which had been pierced by Soviet spearheads. The Dutch SS troops immediately went into action against the enemy. II. Battalion/SS Regiment 49 "De Ruyter" was instrumental in surrounding and reducing a Soviet penetration in the Pilzen Forest. With the help of good artillery support from SS Artillery Regiment 54 "Nederland" and the assistance of assault troops from 11th and 87th Infantry Divisions, II./Regiment "DeR" was able to secure a complete victory, capturing intact a large number of Russian tanks and heavy weapons and eliminating the foe from the battlefield. The fighting lasted for about three weeks, and the battalion commander, Stubaf. Otto Petersen received the Knight's Cross decoration for the successful outcome. While this was taking place, I. Battalion/Rgt. "DeR" was in position in the hill country near Ozoli, and it was able to turn back enemy relief attempts.

After having been separated in the earlier Latvian engagements, the regiments of III. SS Panzer Corps were once again linked together. Their positions on 15 October 1944, running from north to south, were as follows:

II./SS Rgt. 23 "Norge": to the south of 30th Infantry Division on the railroad line east of Preekuln-Vaindoo, including the Hill 39.1.

III./SS Rgt 23 "Norge": south of the main railroad line with its key strongpoint being "Horse Head" Hill.

II./SS Rgt. 24 "Danmark": on the line running from Klein-Trekni to Trusi-Trekni.

III./SS Rgt. 24 "Danmark": to the southwest of II. Battalion at Grudulis, Kirkstal and in the swamp south of Purmsati.

SS Engineer Btl. 54/"Nederland": in the hills northeast of Kaleti.

II./SS Rgt. 49 "DeR": along the railroad line to the east of Annenhof.

III./SS Rgt. 49 "DeR": on the Preekuln-Skuodas railroad line near Ozoli with Hill 17.1 being the central strong-point.

SS Kampfgruppe "Aigner": (these were the remaining elements of "Nederland" combined into one force), from Ozoli to the Apda River on the Lithuanian frontier where it was connected to the 11th Infantry Division.

The HQ of III. Panzer Corps was set up in Goldnieki, while "Nordland's" command post was placed in Maki on the main road between Libau and Preekuln. "Nederland's" HQ was in a group of houses to the southeast of Susten with its main dressing station in Paplaken and its radio section in Susten. All of these command staffs were no more than a few miles apart. Late on 15 October, III. SS Panzer Corps' lines were reinforced by part of 4th Panzer Division which entered the front positions between II./"Norge" and the 30th Infantry Division.

In the early morning hours of 16 October 1944, the Soviets began shelling the positions of II./"Norge," and the battalion's companies, each about 100 men strong, began anticipating the inevitable attack. They could not guess that they would be in action without rest for the next 6 straight days, or that they and their comrades on the northern corps' sector would account for 164 enemy tanks and 80 enemy airplanes in the same time period! But on this autumn morning, the situation looked grim indeed. From the top of Hill 39.1, II./"Norge's" commander, Hstuf. Spoerle, watched in stunned silence as massive communist tank and infantry formations began moving forward. It was clear that there would be some difficult hours ahead.

Almost as soon as the Red assault wave hit the lines, the connections between the "Norge" companies were severed. 7th Company was under attack from three sides while the south wing of 5th Company had been engulfed and was fighting for its existence in bitter hand-to-hand combat. The commander of

5th Company and all of his platoon leaders were killed and the company positions finally gave way. But a regimental reserve force then entered the action. This consisted of Hscha. Luengen and his 8-man platoon along with two assault guns from 8th Company. The assault guns drove straight into the Red infantry, scattering them all over, and 5th Company was able to regain its lines.

All day long, the brave grenadiers of II./"Norge" fought off the enemy in fierce individual battles. A strong Soviet attack was launched against the battalion command post but Hstuf. Spoerle personally led two "storm" troops and two assault guns in a counterattack that repulsed it. By the evening of the 16th, the battalion still held its original positions, but just barely.

III./"Norge" also felt the weight of the Soviet attack on 16 October. In the sector south of the Preekuln-Vainode railroad line, this battalion, led by Hstuf. Hoffman, was fully engaged. The main brunt of the enemy assault fell against 10th Company which held positions on the top of "Horse Head" Hill. The heavy weapons platoon and the battalion reserves were called in to support the company. Many of the soldiers were young replacements who had just arrived at the front, and they received a rough baptism of fire. But together with the old Eastern Front hands they forged their positions into a wall of iron.

The battle for "Horse Head" Hill was extremely violent. As the communists stormed the northern part of the hill, fearful close combat raged and every officer in 10th Company was killed. Into the swirling chaos, Oscha. Diedrichs led his 10 man squad in a spirited counterattack. With the help of some 2 cm Flak guns, Diedrichs and his men were able to push the Russians off the hill. By nightfall all enemy incursions had been eliminated and 10th Company was back in charge of its old positions. But the link-up between II. and III. Battalion/"Norge" had been lost.

On 17 October, the Soviets exploited the gap that existed between the two battalions and broke through near Indriki. Heavy fighting took place on the western perimeter of the town. The "Norge" machine-pistol platoon was sent in to try and close the gap, but the platoon leader was killed and the unit fell apart. Assault squads were formed from parts of 5th and 10th Companies, and by attacking in conjunction from north and south they were able to reseal the lines by evening. For five more days the companies of "Norge" turned back all Soviet attacks, while

the depleted armored and artillery detachments of "Nordland" stood on alert to the west to deal with any breakthroughs.

In the Regiment "Danmark" sector on 16 October the Soviets launched a series of aggressive attacks aimed at taking the town of Trekni and seizing the road to Purmsati. The Danish volunteers were hard put to hold on. In the western part of Trekni, 11th Company/"Danmark" was able to keep the enemy at bay only by firing continuous volleys of mortar and artillery rounds at near point blank range. The Reds soon took their attack elsewhere and succeeded in punching a hole through the juncture where the positions of 10th and 11th Companies/"Danmark" came together. The "Danmark" machine-pistol platoon was sent forward in a counterattack, but it ran into trouble, quickly losing 4 killed and 14 wounded to accurate Russian artillery fire. Ustuf. Schwabenberg led the remnants of the platoon to safety in the lines of 11th Company.

Later in the day, the machine-pistol platoon, supported by 11th Company made another attempt to close the gap with 10th Company. The operation started favorably, but 10th Company, coming under heavy enemy pressure, had been forced to unilaterally shift its positions farther away. This left the 29 soldiers of the machine-pistol platoon with a 1300 yard hole to deal with. After a brisk fire-fight, the effort was abandoned; the Soviets had already occupied the lost ground in strength.

At 1600 hours, the communists began a direct assault on the positions of the machine-pistol platoon and 11th Company. The SS heavy machine-guns were brought into play but they had to be used sparingly due to a shortage of ammunition. Hscha. Albrecht, the commander of 11th Company, went from one machine-gun emplacement to the next, directing their fire. The company's lightly wounded were finally brought into position to help shore up the lines. This worked for awhile, but towards evening another critical situation had developed. The Soviets were infiltrating the lines by swimming through small streams. Hscha. Albrecht shot three red flares into the sky to direct artillery fire from II./SS Artillery Rgt. 11/"Nordland." Hit by accurate shelling, the Russian sneak attack soon fizzled out.

During the night, Hstuf. Ternedde began reorganizing the positions of his II./"Danmark." Ammunition and supplies were sent up to the front and the wounded were evacuated. 13th Company/"Danmark," led by Oscha. Noach, was brought forward out of reserve and its young Norwegian commander took



SS-Obergruppenführer Felix Steiner, one of the "founding fathers" of the Waffen-SS and commander of the III. SS Panzer Corps (Germanic).

charge of the battalion's artillery preparations. Early on 17 October the Soviets were back, only this time they were met by accurate heavy weapons fire from II./"Danmark" and the attack was abruptly brought to a halt. At 0900 hours the Reds poured a murderous mortar and artillery barrage onto II. Battalion's positions. After twenty minutes it slackened off and the Soviet infantry came charging back shouting "Urrah, Urrah!" But once again the attack collapsed in the face of a stiff stream of fire, this time emanating from III./"Danmark." On 18 and 19 October a few enemy probing attacks were easily driven off by III. Battalion while the rest of "Danmark's" sector remained quiet.

A few days later, a fairly weak Russian force slipped through the gap between II. and III./"Danmark." This element managed to seize part of the Gramsdén-Purmsati road, triggering a new

crisis for the German side in the process. 3rd Company/SS Recce Battalion 11 led by the Swedish Ostuf. Persson, made an unsuccessful attempt to dislodge the enemy intruders. The danger became more grave when more communist troops moved into the salient. The Danish Hstuf. Per Sorensen was instructed to form a battle-group and restore the lines. Sorensen quickly put together a task force composed of 5th Company/"Danmark," Machine-Pistol Platoon "Schwabenberg," the Emergency Company "Rossman," and troops from "Danmark's" transport corps. Sorensen deployed his Kampfgruppe in the village of Kelputi, directly opposite the Soviet element that had infiltrated the town of Trekni.

On 23 October, a scouting party from Company "Rossman" attempted to make a tentative link-up between II. and III./"Danmark," but it ran into a superior enemy scout troop and was pinned down by heavy fire after losing 1 killed and 4 wounded. The little group was able to safely make it back to the German lines under the cover of darkness. The next day saw a lull in the action but large scale enemy troop preparations were observed.

The next formidable Soviet effort began on the morning of 26 October with the application of heavy artillery fire on the positions of 6th Company/"Danmark." Once this had abated, the enemy infantry struck in force and pummelled their way through the company's lines. It was a dangerous moment. II./"Danmark's" commander, Hstuf. Bergfeld was able to pinch off the penetration with his battalion reserves in the afternoon, but the threat of more Soviet moves still lingered.

On 27 October, the Russians launched their big offensive at the exact center of the Kurland Front with the aim of splitting the German forces in two. No fewer than 45 Guards Divisions and a Tank Corps led the initial assault, followed closely by 2 more Tank Corps. The whole German front trembled under the impact of fire from 2,000 massed communist artillery pieces, and the south wing of the Kurland sector, held by III. SS Panzer Corps, was soon fighting for its very existence.

SS Regiment "Norge" found itself in an absolutely hopeless struggle; enormous Soviet infantry and tank forces had overwhelmed the regimental positions. The Norwegian SS companies were first reduced to platoon strength and then broken into small fragments. The front could no longer be held. III./

"Norge" was forced to retreat to the northwest while Hstuf. Spoerle's II./"Norge" conducted a fighting withdrawal to the west. Along the railroad lines a huge gap had been torn between these two battalions and further north, all contact with the 30th Infantry Division had been lost.

At 1200 hours, the reserve companies of SS Recce Battalion 11/"Nordland" were put on emergency alert. 4th Company under Ostuf. Schirmer was dispatched to assist the HQ of Regiment "Norge" as it prepared a last ditch defensive effort south-east of Preekuln. A solitary 88 mm Flak gun provided the main weapon of defense for the regimental staff. 4th Company/SS Recce Battalion 11 now took up positions in the high ground south of Adami where it was able to restore contact to the embattled III. Battalion/"Norge" to the southwest. This unit had lost 60% of its personnel in the day's fighting. As the "Norge" companies struggled to create a new defensive line, the Soviets began bearing down on them. Ostuf. Schirmer then led his 4th Company/SS Recce Btl. 11 in a sharp counterattack.

The armored cars of 4th Company ran straight into a contingent of enemy flame-throwing tanks that nearly created a panic on the German side. But an unknown SS man scored a direct hit on one of those monstrous vehicles and it was the Soviet's turn to panic; the other tanks were routed. During the night, Regiment "Norge" finally managed to close the dangerous gap in its lines when II./"Norge" made contact with 3./SS Recce Btl. 11 along the Preekuln-Vainode railroad line. In addition, a battery of Army assault guns moved into supporting positions in the hills east of Preekuln.

Early in the morning of 28 October, the enemy assault resumed. The SS Recce companies led by Schirmer and Persson repulsed all attacks. Every time the communists were forced back they responded with a fresh artillery barrage then attacked again. They had new units lined up for miles to throw into the action while the Germans had nothing in reserve. At about noon, Ostuf. Schirmer fell badly wounded and his company was taken over by a platoon leader, Uscha. Stuhn. Stuhn, who spoke both Latvian and Russian, was a remarkable individual who had only recently carried out a brave, solitary intelligence mission behind the enemy lines. He had spent three days and nights posing as a civilian in Soviet occupied towns, collecting information on the enemy tank strength. Now he led the men of 4./SS

Recce Btl. 11 in fighting for every yard of ground against the communists. On 29 October, in the midst of a furious battle, Unterscharfuehrer Stuhn was killed in action.

Also on 29 October, SS Regiment "Norge" fell back to new lines that ran to the south and southeast of Preekuln. But the companies had been reduced to skeletons. 10./"Norge" for instance, had only 3 NCOs and 16 men left. On 30 October, a Soviet storm troop attacked 10th Company's new positions. The communists were turned back, but the acting company commander, Uscha. Diderichs was badly wounded. Uscha. Schellenberger, a former regular army NCO, now took charge of the tiny company.

The sector held by SS Regiment "Danmark" also came under enormous pressure on 27 October. At regimental HQ, the commander, Ostubaf. Kruegel monitored the radio messages from the front line companies and worried about the developing events. The first radio dispatch came from 5th Company at 0930 hours: "5th Company is under enemy attack. Our battle line still holds!" There was some comfort in that message, but in the forward positions the battle grew ever more violent. The main enemy attack centered on the village of Kelputi held by 6th Company. At 1030 hours a new message arrived at "Danmark" HQ from Hstuf. Bergfeld, commander of II. Battalion: "There has been an enemy penetration in the sector of 6th Company; 7th Company is still holding." At 1100 hours, 5th Company radioed in: "The enemy has broken through 6th Company's positions and has been sighted to the rear of 5th Company."

Ostubaf. Kruegel, who had set up his forward command post on the heights of Hill 28.3, sent back one reply to all of his companies: "Hold your positions!" At 1110 hours, the Emergency Company "Rossman" in Kelputi radioed regimental HQ: "Strong enemy infantry and tank attacks are underway on our company's sector." At the same time, 10th Company and the part of 11th Company that was south of the Gramsden-Purmsati road, were driven into the woods southwest of Grudulis. Still in place along both sides of the road near Trekni was the remainder of 11th Company along with the regimental machine-pistol platoon. On both sides of them numerous enemy vehicles were flooding past. Ostubaf. Kruegel had a succinct message for this group. At 1120 hours he radioed them: "Hold under all circumstances!" But it was not to be.

The batteries of Artillery Regiment "Nordland" that provided fire support for "Danmark," were in a position to observe what was happening up front. The range finder for II./SS Art. Rgt.11, radioed "Danmark" HQ at 1140 hours: "The enemy in the sector of 5th Company and the Emergency Company has broken through." Five minutes later a new observation was reported: "5th Company and the Emergency Company have been overwhelmed — the position of the Machine-Pistol Platoon "Schwabenberg" is unclear."

The situation may have been unclear to the artillery spotter but to the soldiers of the machine-pistol platoon and 11./"Danmark," it was self-evident. Out of panzerfauste, running low on ammunition, and faced by an unending stream of enemy tanks and infantry, the survivors had decided to cut and run. By following a concrete drainage pipe that ran under the Trekni road, these troops were eventually able to reach the safety of the forward observation post of II. Detachment/SS Art.Rgt.11. All that was left of 11th Company were 2 NCOs and 7 men, while the machine-pistol platoon still had 1 Norwegian officer, 2 NCOs and 6 men. In the evening, joined by the range finders and the remnants of 12./"Danmark," everyone retreated to the woods south of Grudulis. The wounded were carried in tarpulans.

At 1300 hours on 27 October, the Soviets reached Hill 28.3. Blocking their way were the soldiers of Kampfgruppe "Sorensen," with 5./"Danmark" in the woods on the northwestern part of the hill, and 6th, 7th and 8th Companies in the nearby vicinity. At 1310 hours, "Danmark's" HQ sent its last message to the hill defenders: "Hold Hill 28.3 under all circumstances!" To assist in that objective. Ostubaf. Kruegel dispatched 2 assault guns to the area. A particularly dangerous situation developed at 1600 hours as Hill 28.3 was gripped in violent close combat. The providential appearance of Emergency Company "Rossman," which had been carefully retreating from no-man's-land, helped save the day, and as night fell, the hill remained firmly in the hands of the Waffen-SS volunteers.

Early in the morning of 28 October, the Soviets bore down on Hill 28.3 with great force and succeeded in capturing the main defensive positions. The two assault guns led the "Danmark" grenadiers back in a counterattack and the lines were retaken. The enemy now attempted to outflank the hill to the north. A spearhead element broke through at the juncture of

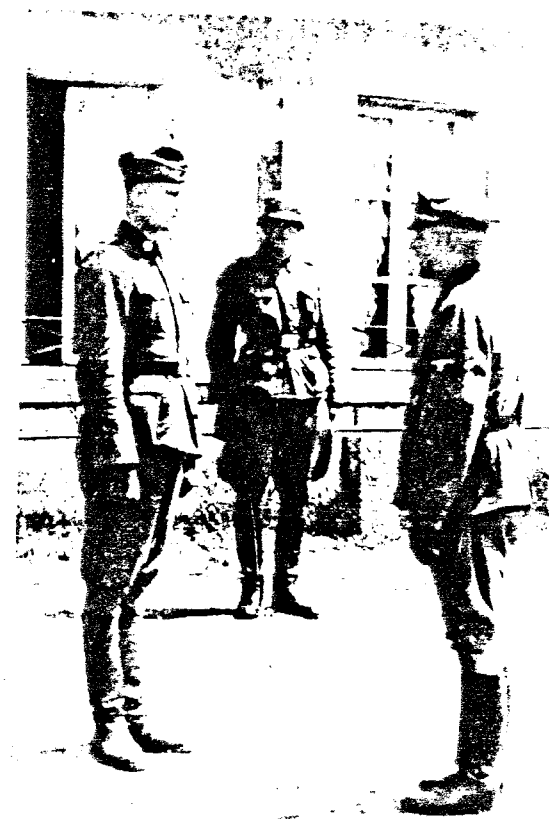
5th and 6th Companies and put the SS mortar and artillery firing positions in the rear area in jeopardy.

Ostufaf. Kruegel decided to pull back the heavy weapons batteries. To cover their withdrawal he ordered the assault guns with 2 flak guns from 14th Company to lay down a screening fire along the Purmsati road. By late afternoon the whole regiment was in full retreat towards Purmsati. Right on their heels came the Reds. In the early evening the Purmasati railroad station fell and Ostufaf. Kruegel decided that that was enough. He hastily grouped his depleted companies in makeshift defenses along the railroad tracks that ran between Preekuln to Skuodas on a north-south axis. In the darkness, the "Nordland" divisional adjutant, Stubaf. Witten, accidentally drove into the Russian lines at Purmsati in his VW "Schwimmwagen." Thirty minutes later his driver made it back to the "Danmark" lines to report that Witten and his messenger had been killed.

During the night, Ostufaf. Kruegel and "Nordland's" commander, Brigfhr. Ziegler, visited the forward elements in the Purmsati sector. A plan was devised to achieve a link-up with "Nederland's" engineer battalion to the south. It was also decided to bring in parts of "Nordland's" field replacement battalion, which had been engaged as a special purpose task force in the Autz area. Before morning, the first 40 men from this battalion had come up and were assigned to Kampfgruppe "Sorensen," which had been given the job of defending the center of Purmsati. This battle-group now consisted of parts of 5./"Danmark," SS Artillery Rgt. 11, Emergency Company "Danmark," and "Nordland's" repair and maintenance battalion, which was usually a non-combatant element.

29 October proved to be an uneasy day as the enemy gradually exploited his penetrations into the German lines. The day started off with a small disaster. The 40 man reserve platoon that had just been assigned to Kampfgruppe "Sorensen," was decoyed into an enemy ambush and most of the men were captured. Shortly afterwards, 3rd Company of the SS Field Replacement Btl. 11/"Nordland" was sent to Hstuf. Sorensen and he deployed it in the Purmsati schoolhouse. The main body of the battalion under Ostufaf. Lang was sent to the nearby town of Gumby.

Under skillfull leadership by the "Danmark" officers, the Purmsati Front slowly firmed up. The 2 assault guns from "Nordland" travelled all over the sector, bringing help wherever



SS-Obersturmbannführer Fritz Knoechlein, here (left) as an SS-Hauptsturmführer with the SS "Totenkopf" Division in France, 1941. Ostufaf. Knoechlein commanded the SS Regiment 23 "Norge" throughout much of the Narva fighting.

they could. A major battle developed between the railroad station and the schoolhouse, with the fighting see-sawing up and down the main street of Purmsati. Finally the assault guns came on the scene and were used to lead a counterattack. The railroad station soon went up in flames and the Russians were driven out of the town.

During the middle of the day the enemy drove back into Purmsati with tanks and attached infantry and attacked towards the schoolhouse. Hstuf. Sorensen's SS men went tank-hunting. The first enemy tank suddenly burst into flames, followed quickly by a second and a third. A fourth tank was disabled as it tried desperately to get away. The Russians retreated and soon an expected hail of artillery and mortar shells fell on the defenders. By evening the situation was still critical. North of Purmsati the enemy flowed through a break in the lines with tanks and armored vehicles. But Purmsati and its schoolhouse held firm against the communist flak. 30 October saw more savage fighting for the town but the enemy could not make any headway.

On 31 October, the battle for Purmsati began to wane, but not before one last Soviet effort was made. At 1600 hours the enemy began a twenty minute artillery barrage on the town. This was followed by the inevitable infantry attack. But it was a half-hearted effort. The Red Army soldiers had simply been pushed down the main road by their commissars who were always eager to sacrifice them. The road had been well targeted by the European defenders and the Russians were simply slaughtered in droves. It was an exercise in futility, but the communist bosses seemingly were never satisfied unless they had used up a certain quota of soldiers each day. Is it any wonder why the Soviet armed forces absorbed enormous* casualties in the course of the war?

In the darkness of the evening the enemy penetration to the north of Purmsati was also sealed off and every tank that had broken through was destroyed. During the night, Kampfgruppe "Sorensen" was reinforced by 75 recovered wounded from the III. SS Panzer Corps field hospital. The way things had been going this was as good as receiving a full brigade! There was no

* The Soviets claim 20 million war dead, but most historians are in agreement that the Soviet's casualty figure is an exaggeration.

way the enemy could get through now; Regiment "Danmark" had won the day.

A number of soldiers were decorated for their performances at Purmsati. Among these were Ostubaf. Karl, commander of the SS Art.Rgt.11/"Nordland" and Stubaf. Potschka, commander of III./SS Art.Rgt.11; both were awarded the Knight's Cross. Others who received the German Army Honor Roll Clasp and whose deeds were recorded for posterity in the Wehrmacht roll of honor, were: Hstuf. Sorensen (battle-group commander), Ostubaf. Lang ("Nordland" replacement battalion), Hstuf. Ternedde (commander of III./"Danmark"), Uscha. Jonstrup (Staff Company/"Danmark"), and Stubaf. Fischer (commander of II./SS Art.Rgt.11). Uscha. Jonstrup was an old "front fighter" who had been close to the legendary commander of the "Freikorps Danmark," Ostubaf. C.F. von Schalburg. While carrying a message across the Purmsati battlefield to the regimental command post, Jonstrup was hit in the face by a shell splinter that cost him the lower half of his jawbone. Despite his condition he finished his assigned task before leaving for the hospital. The message he delivered concerned the repositioning of the Emergency Company "Rossman"; had Jonstrup not gotten through Company "Rossman" might not have survived and the front lines would not have remained intact.

Stormbrigade "Nederland" also felt the impact of the great Russian offensive of 27 October 1944. The enemy goal in the Dutch SS sector was to secure the towns of Kaleti and Purmsati; the latter of which was still occupied by troops from II./SS Rgt. 49 "DeR" at this point in time. Having been repulsed in their drive on Purmsati by Hstuf. Ternedde's III./"Danmark" to the south of the town, the Reds rerouted their attack through the sector held by II./"DeR." After a tremendous expenditure of artillery fire, a penetration was bludgeoned through the Dutch lines. The Soviet drive was temporarily driven back by the accurate fire of Ustuf. Rieth's battery from SS Art.Rgt.54/"Nederland," but in the end the pressure was too great. The front lines buckled and "Nederland's" infantry began a precipitous withdrawal.

The focal point of the enemy attack soon shifted to Hill 17.1 at Ozoli where I./SS Rgt. 49 "DeR" was in place. "De Ruyter's" 1st Company, led by Hstuf. Schluifelder was responsible for defending the central part of the hill. Following the usual artillery barrage, a massive infantry attack against Hill

17.1's defensive positions began. The battle that developed was violent beyond description. If anything it resembled the ferocious struggles that took place for "Orphanage" and "Grenadier" Hills in Estonia. Fortunately this time the defenders had an extra ally: the German Luftwaffe. Putting in an all too rare appearance, the German dive-bombers and fighters wrought havoc among the enemy ground troops. That brought an end to the battle for the day and enabled I./"DeR" to build up its positions.

The next day and for several more days to come, in fact through the first week in November, the Russians came back again and again to assail the slopes of Hill 17.1. The defense of the hill was a true epic of heroism and sacrifice. Each day the two sides came to grips at arm's length and each day the communists were driven back in the bitterest close combat imaginable. Hstuf. Schluifelder was always in the front lines, leading, directing and encouraging his men; wherever the fighting was hardest, Schluifelder was there. When the exhausted enemy finally gave up the effort in November, Hstuf. Georg Schluifelder was presented with a well-deserved Knight's Cross.

By early November, the Soviet 27 October offensive finally petered out. Except for a few minor gains it had been a total failure and had cost the Reds thousands of casualties. Regiment "De Ruyter" now changed commanders with Stubaf. Lohmann, having recovered from wounds at Narva, replacing Ostubaf. Bunse. The time had also come to try and strengthen the terribly reduced companies of the III. SS Panzer Corps' units, most of which only contained 40 or 50 men. In other areas, Ostubaf. Albrecht Kruegel was awarded the coveted oak-leaves to the Knight's Cross that he had won at Narva. He was also granted a much delayed rest leave and his place at the helm of SS Rgt. 24 "Danmark" was taken over by Ostubaf. von Boch und Pollach, "Nordland's" chief-of-staff.

The enemy too was recouping his strength. For a few days instead of fighting, the Soviets treated the men of III. SS Panzer Corps to front line loudspeaker propaganda broadcasts conducted by members of the "National Committee for a Free Germany," a traitor organization that had been formed by turncoat German POWs. Not long after the cessation of these broadcasts, the 'Free Germans' put in an appearance on the battlefield. They attacked "Nordland's" replacement battalion in groups of about 30 men each, who wore German uniforms with distin-

guishing armbands. These efforts were not taken too seriously by the German side as the 'Free Germans' seemed to have little enthusiasm for what they were doing.

On 12 November 1944, the Soviets began a series of daily artillery barrages and softening-up attacks that culminated in the launching of another large-scale ground offensive on 24 November. Although the fighting was difficult, the German side was able to stop the superior enemy forces through proper artillery placement, the quick utilization of armored reserves, and the cool-headed sacrifices of the European volunteers who manned the front lines. Through these methods the beleaguered garrison of the Kurland Pocket was able to hold out, undefeated, until the end of the war.

The third Russian Kurland offensive began on 21 December 1944, with the port of Libau again being the objective. 20 Red Army divisions were massed along a 20 mile front against Obergruppenfuehrer Walter Krueger's VI. SS Latvian Army Corps and Gruppenfuehrer Streckenbach's 19th Latvian SS Division. The attack got nowhere. The Latvian SS men fought back like tigers, and with unbelievable heroism destroyed one enemy division after another. The proof of their achievements can be found in the disproportionate number of decorations for bravery bestowed upon them. At least while fighting for their homeland, the Latvians were superlative soldiers.

Fortunately for the men of III. SS Panzer Corps, the third Kurland battle largely passed them by. But for the Kurland Army as a whole it was the culmination of three months of debilitating combat actions that saw 71,013 casualties inflicted upon the German side. Soviet losses were estimated to be *five to ten* times that amount! For the first time all year, the different units of III. SS Panzer Corps were pulled out of the front lines in rotation and sent to the Paplaken Forest for up to two weeks of rest.

The middle of December 1944 brought heavy frost and snowfall as well as an increase in the enemy air attacks on Libau. A good many of the Soviet planes were shot down by soldiers in the field, but there never was a shortage of them — the U.S. government saw to that! However, some of the captured pilots proved to be good sources of information. Intelligence gathering was always essential and sometimes the only way to do it was by raiding the enemy lines. To do this special "storm troops" were formed from units of "Nordland" and "Nederland" with

instructions to cross behind the enemy lines and bring back prisoners for interrogation. When these dangerous missions succeeded the enemy inevitably responded with heavy artillery fire in retribution. Shortly before Christmas a snow storm hit the III. SS Panzer Corps sector and all military operations on both sides were brought to a halt. Christmas Eve passed peacefully with all the normal trappings of the holiday in the front bunkers. In addition a distribution of special rations allotments and locally grown produce was made to the men.

On 2 January 1945, the "storm troops" started going out again. One such group from the Recce Battalion "Nordland" blundered into a Russian minefield and lost 1 man killed and 7 others wounded. An attempt was made to clear these minefields (lying on the outskirts of Purmsati), but too many of "Nordland's" engineers were killed or disabled and the effort had to be called off. On 8 January 1945, a lively enemy artillery barrage began on the Purmsati sector. Soviet troop and vehicle movements were observed as well, but no one was sure whether the Reds were dispersing (as it appeared on the surface), or simply reinforcing their units.

Further reports of Russian transport movements came in on 9 January from the defenders around Hill 28.3 and Trekni, and the rear area positions of the SS artillery batteries came under a well-aimed, deliberate enemy fire. A strong point known as the "Haunted House" that was just north of the Purmsati school and was manned by a squad from 8./"Danmark" under Uscha. Laursen, received a blistering drilling from Soviet heavy weapons. In the process, the main building was set on fire, a radio-man was killed and Uscha. Laursen was mortally wounded.

In the course of 10 January, the heavy communist fire continued, but the enemy objectives were still unknown. A new scouting party was readied for a mission but it was unable to make it through the minefields. This frustrated one Danish machine-gunner who decided to take things into his own hands. On 12 January he slipped out through the minefields around Purmsati, entered the Russian lines, took a prisoner at gunpoint, and brought him back safely to the German lines. The captive was escorted to the command post of II./"Danmark" where a conference between the battalion commander, Stubaf. Bergfeld, the regimental commander, Ostubaf. Kruegel, and the artillery regiment commander, Ostubaf. Karl, was taking place. The Russian passed on so much information that it was determined that



SS-Sturmbannführer Wilhelm Schueter, commander of SS Artillery Regiment 54/"Nederland."

the sacrifice of another "storm troop" was unnecessary. The Danish volunteer who brought in the prisoner was given the Iron Cross, first class on the spot and sent on home leave.

From the information received from the prisoner, it was decided that the Soviet forces in the III. SS Panzer Corps sector were building up their strength for another major offensive effort. Acting on this determination, several changes were made during the night of 12 January to strengthen the front lines. II./"Danmark" exchanged places with the Replacement Battalion "Nordland" in the Paplaken area. SS Recce Btl. 11/"Nordland" moved into the readiness positions to the north of Purmsati. Stubaf. Bergfeld was named the new "Nordland" divisional adjutant and his place as commander of II./"Danmark" was assumed by the Danish Hstuf. Per Sorensen. For Sorensen it was a long overdue assignment; for 3½ hard years he had been a front line company and battle-group commander.

A further restructuring of the defensive positions took place in the following days. III./"Danmark" was sent from the area south of Purmsati to new positions south of Preekuln, while III./"Norge" moved to the north of the city and made a link-up with the 30th Infantry Division. II./"Norge" moved into the woods near Paplaken. The fourth battle for Kurland opened up on 20 January 1945 with the usual massive Soviet artillery shelling. This had the effect of reducing the buildings in Purmsati and other villages to rubble. Surprisingly the infantry attack did not materialize at the conclusion of the shelling. The SS troops were dumbfounded, but they were able to watch continual, large-scale ground and air, troop and material movements taking place behind the enemy lines. Nerves were stretched to the limit in anticipation of the enemy's next move.

Division "Nordland" remained at the highest state of alert, but still the Red infantry didn't come. Two more days passed, then in the pre-dawn hours of 23 January the assault commenced. The soldiers of II./"Danmark" were not surprised. Hstuf. Sorensen had spent the night in the front lines and the men had a saying about him that went back to his days with the "Freikorps Danmark": "Wherever Sorensen is, the Russians will come!" They were right as usual.

11 Red Army divisions stormed towards Preekuln at the break of dawn, attacking from two directions. The full weight of the battle fell on the 30th Infantry Division and the III. SS Panzer Corps. Artillery shells hailed down on the positions of

Division "Nordland," and the main thrust of the ground attack came full bore towards the line held by Regiment "Danmark" to the north of Purmsati. For the Danish SS grenadiers it had been a harrowing morning. Their positions had been plastered by shells of all calibers topped off by a furious barrage of "Stalin Organ" rocket mortars. When the numbed soldiers finally peeked out of their trenches they found that the sky had been totally obscured by acrid smoke and the vast, white snowy landscape was gone, replaced by giant shell craters.

When the guns fell silent, a force of 40 Soviet tanks followed by infantry squads, moved directly towards "Danmark's" lines. They ran into a den of wildcats. With selfless heroism the grenadiers of 6./"Danmark" destroyed all ten enemy tanks in their sector at close range and mowed down the infantry escort. Farther north, the other 30 tanks collided head on with 7th and 11th Companies. They were driving for the Purmsati-Paplaken road, but the Danish volunteers resisted with dogged determination. Clinging to their positions, they defended every square foot of ground with utmost tenacity. The tanks were turned back only to fall with full strength on 6th Company.

10 or even 20 tanks could be dealt with, but 30 was just too many. The positions of 6th Company were at last overrun, and the tanks turned back towards 7th Company. By concentrating on a narrow front they were able to roll through 7th and 11th Companies in succession. That opened the floodgates; huge convoys of motorized Red infantry drove through the gaps that had been torn open by the tanks. The stability of the whole defensive line north of Purmsati was threatened. The batteries of Artillery Regiment "Nordland" blazed away without pause, but they had to keep adjusting their positions to keep up with the Russian columns that were streaming to the west.

Ustuf. Birkedal-Hansen's heavy weapons group from 8./"Danmark" almost went under. Only terrific individual effort prevented a disaster. Rottenfuehrer Wirth with his "swineherd" (mortar rocket launcher), rushed from position to position firing "wild sows" (soldier's slang for rockets). 8th Company's two machine-gun teams stayed in place firing continuously at point-blank range. Finally, the enemy decided to switch his attack towards 13./"Danmark" instead. While 13th Company desperately battled it out, the commanders of II. and III./"Danmark" regrouped their surviving troops along a new defensive line.

At noon the Russians directly attacked Purmsati but "Nordland's" Replacement Battalion under Ostubaf. Lang held them back. Further to the south the Recce Battalion "Nordland" blocked off the enemy effort to reach the main road. In the late afternoon, II./"Norge" reached the sector of Regiment "Danmark" to prepare a counterattack. But the officers of "Danmark" were mainly concerned with just hanging on. They tallied up the company balance sheets. 6th Company was down to 1 officer and 3 men, while 7th Company still had 1 officer and 14 men. 8th Company had been reduced by almost half and had lost many of its weapons and vehicles. The other "Danmark" companies were not much better off.

III./"Danmark" had lost most of its officers in the fighting and had been forced to give up its southern front. To the north, all links with the neighboring III./"Norge" had been severed. During the night the bulk of 14th Panzer Division moved into the "Danmark" sector; on the next day they would prepare a surprise for the confident communists. Early on 24 January, 14th Panzer went on the attack and fought for many long hours in the ruins of Purmsati and Bunkas. This at least stabilized the situation for the day. Both sides exhibited a tremendous display of firepower as the fighting continued at long range.

By the morning of 25 January, the temperature had dropped to 20 below zero. The Soviet attack began to sputter out except in Purmsati itself. All day long, "Nordland's" Replacement Battalion stubbornly contested each pile of debris in Purmsati, but by evening there was nothing really left to defend. The battalion finally pulled out.

The SS "Nederland" sector ("Nederland" had been upgraded to a Division), saw heavy action beginning on 23 January 1945. The division's thin defensive lines were splintered still more by intensive enemy artillery fire. The follow-up infantry attacked achieved a major breakthrough in the area between Ozoli Hill and Hill 17.1 to the north, but both hills stayed in the hands of small Dutch SS battle-groups. Hill 17.1 had been briefly lost but was retaken in a counterattack, while Ozoli Hill remained stoutly defended by Ustuf. Schluifelder's 1st Company/SS Regiment 49 "De Ruyter."

The Gramsden-Kaleti road quickly became the focal point of the struggle. The ground north of the road was held by II./"DeR" with I./"DeR" on the south side of it. With the constant

help of Stubaf. Schlueter's SS Artillery Regiment 54/"Nederland," the "De Ruyter" grenadier battalions were able to pinch off the communist penetration force. After a full day of grim fighting and precarious developments, 23 January ended with the "Nederland" Division positions still essentially intact. But the commander, Brigfhr. Juergen Wagner was still worried. Front line intelligence reports indicated that the enemy had more than enough reserves to renew his attack with force. There would be much more fighting to come.

24 January dawned with the usual heavy Russian shelling. "Nederland's" lines, running north to south, looked like this: SS Engineer Btl. 54 under Hstuf. Wanhoefer, II./"DeR" under Stubaf. Petersen, I./"DeR" under Stubaf. Unger and the mixed battalion-sized battle-group led by Hstuf. Aigner. The shell-shocked troops soon felt the impact of yet another mammoth enemy ground attack. On Ozoli Hill, the southern bastion of the lines, the action surged back and forth with the Reds swarming forward again and again only to be flung back by savage counterattacks. Finally the hill garrison went under; Ustuf. Schluifelder was badly wounded and shot himself rather than fall into communist hands. The surviving remnants of 1st Company/"De Ruyter" fell back to the west and the main battle lines shifted westward to the railroad lines.

The key defensive strong points along the Gramsden-Kaleti road were still holding, but just barely. 3rd Battery/SS Art.Rgt. 54 led by Ostuf. Behler had no forward observers left so its fire was guided solely by radio reports from the regimental headquarters. But by mid-day, Behler's positions were entirely surrounded by the enemy. In bloody, close combat, Ostuf. Behler and a few of his men manage to breakout to the west. In the same battle area, Danish Ostuf. Johannes Hellmer's company from II./"DeR" was also fighting for its life.

By the afternoon of 24 January, an enemy armored column had attained the main road and was driving deep behind the German lines to the west. "Nederland's" Flak Detachment 54 was all that remained to stop the tanks. Fortunately it proved up to the task; the gunners turned their weapons on the Soviet armored vehicles with good effect. The enemy drive was brought to a standstill.

In the north, SS Engineer Btl. 54 had had an easier time of it. When night fell it joined with "Nederland's" recce company and 2 flak platoons to form a new battle-group. This combined

force then cut its way through the enemy penetration and began setting up a new improvised defensive line to the west. On 25 January, the Soviets began their most murderous shelling of the "Nederland" positions to date. Ostubaf. Lohmann's Regiment "De Ruyter" was buried under fiery metal; enormous losses were taken. Then came the Red infantry. All of the high ground around Annenhof, Meiri and Ozolnieki was lost in savage fighting. The Dutch SS companies were splintered into small groups of men that nonetheless kept up a determined resistance.

The survivors from Ostuf. Hellmer's company and Ostuf. Behler's battery regrouped and steadfastly held to their new positions. The observation post from II./SS Art.Rgt. 54, was cutoff and became the scene of a bitter struggle. Using his own initiative, a gunner from this post, Kanonier Jenschke, whose rank was the equivalent of private, led a small battle-group to a successful breakout. Jenschke's rank insignia had been obscured by his camouflage jacket, so the men he had been ordering about were unaware that they all outranked him! Jenschke was later awarded the Knight's Cross for heroism.

Elsewhere, the SS Engineer Kampfgruppe "Wanhoefer" was able to maintain its positions on 25 January, but it lost all contact with II./"DeR" to the south. The atmosphere of the day can best be found in this extract from Ustuf. Horstmann's war diary of 25 January 1945:

"During these two days of heavy fighting all of the companies in the main battle line were fully extended. There is nothing to fall back on. Now only the key points in the old defensive lines – which the enemy has mostly seized – are still defended. The battalion headquarters has become a strong point and the road is our battle line. Petersen and Unger ("De Ruyter's" battalion commanders), could only spare 7 men to defend the whole of Kaleti."

During the night, the intact engineer battle-group under Hstuf. Wanhoefer launched an attack from its south wing against the Soviets, who were pouring down the Gramsden-Kaleti road. At midnight, two assault guns from "Nederland" came up in support, but to no avail. It was no longer possible to rebuild the old front. In the hours after midnight, the communists advanced towards the HQ complex of SS Regiment 49 "DeR" that was located about a mile or so northwest of Kaleti in the small village of Grantini. The precautionary stationing of signals troops in an emergency observation post nearby gave the

regimental staff adequate warning of the enemy advance. In the early morning hours of 26 January, the "De Ruyter" staff withdrew to the village of Small Kaleti, and conceded Grantini and Kaleti to the enemy.

During the course of the morning, armored vehicles from 14th Panzer Division arrived in the "Nederland" sector to help bolster the front. All that remained of "Nederland's" armored strength, one self-propelled gun, had stayed behind in Kaleti, delaying the enemy seizure of that town for as long as possible. Now it finally withdrew. Soon afterwards, tanks from 14th Panzer, accompanied by grenadiers from 7th Company/"De Ruyter," mounted a counterattack to the north of Kaleti. This brought some temporary relief to the sector, but the commander of 7th Company, Ostuf. Grabow, was badly wounded in the engagement.

Kampfgruppe "Wanhoefer" was deployed in a wavy line to the northeast of Kaleti. Around noon on 26 January, it came under enemy tank attack and was forced to fall back. The situation deteriorated rapidly and the battle-group was soon surrounded. To save his troops, Hstuf. Wanhoefer had to act fast; he ordered an immediate fighting breakout to the main German lines. After an arduous struggle, the SS engineers reached the high ground to the northwest of Kaleti. During the withdrawal some of the men noticed that Hstuf. Wanhoefer was no longer with them. Going back they found him lying badly wounded on the battlefield. With desperate courage, a handful of soldiers charged into the advancing enemy and literally pulled Wanhoefer out of the way of the treads of a moving tank. He was later brought to safety.

At 1240 hours, the Soviets gained the ground that separated Kaleti from its suburb of Small Kaleti. But a hurriedly called up Army infantry battalion blocked their way. On a hill north of Grantini, south of the Birkstal River, "Nederland's" training platoon under Ustuf. Kraemer went into position and was able to place a good harassing fire on the open Soviet right flank. On the nearby Wartage River, emergency units called in from Libau built up new blocking positions. At the same time, Stubaf. Petersen was able to regroup his II./"DeR" in Small Kaleti and repulse all further enemy advances. He was assisted in this effort by a battery of Army self-propelled guns that had just arrived.

For all practical purposes the battle had ended; the Russians had lost the majority of their first-line troops and reserves –

they were absolutely burned out. Division "Nederland," with the help of parts of the 14th Panzer and 218th Infantry Divisions, was now able to maintain a stable front that ran from Krute to Small Kaleti to Kodeli. Ostubaf. Lohmann, the commander of Regiment "De Ruyter," made a head count of his surviving front line troops. The regiment now had an effective combat strength of exactly 80 men! One year earlier, "De Ruyter" had gone into action on the Oranienbaum Front with three full battalions containing 2,000 soldiers!

Ustuf. Horstmann from the SS Artillery Regiment 54/"Nederland," left this description of the final phase of the Kaleti fighting:

"This, the defensive struggle of SS Division "Nederland," was the most heroic battle that I have ever lived through. Everyone stayed in position to the finish. The attack came right up to the barrels of our artillery pieces. The firing pits were the main battle line. But although we were eventually forced back and dispersed, we had acquitted ourselves with honor."

This battle marked the end of III. SS Panzer Corps stay in the Baltic states. The "Narva" period, the symbolic struggle of the multi-national European volunteer SS forces in the East, had reached its conclusion. The record speaks for itself. The units of III. SS Panzer Corps were now shipped back to eastern Germany, where they were reformed on the run and once again flung into the cauldron of fire. The battles for Pomerania, Brandenburg and Berlin would prove to be even more exacting than those that took place in the Baltic countries.

One by one, veterans of the Narva Front, would perish in the inferno engulfing the lands of the German Reich. Regiment "Danmark" had three of its commanding officers, Kruegel, Klotz and Per Sorensen, killed in succession. Brigadefuehrer Ziegler, commander of Division "Nordland," became acutely depressed during the battle for Berlin and had to be relieved of command. He was killed trying to breakout of the city. For those who did not die on the battlefield, there awaited a brutal captivity, which often resulted in slow deaths in slave labor camps or quick deaths by execution. Ostubaf. Knoechlein who had commanded SS Regiment 23 "Norge" with courage and foresight during the "Narva Front" engagements, was the victim of a British Army kangaroo court. He was first tortured and then executed after a questionable 'war crimes' trial. Brigade-

fuehrer Wagner, the outstanding commander of Division "Nederland," was given a "clean bill of health" by both the British and Americans, but because his unit had fought briefly (and honorably) in Yugoslavia he was extradited to that country. Tito had him tortured and executed!

There are many more stories of similar horror to tell, but not enough space to document in this book. About half of the surviving members of III. SS Panzer Corps eventually wound up in Soviet captivity and only a fraction of those soldiers ever returned home from Siberia. Fate was kinder to Obergruppenfuehrer Steiner, who was in many respects, one of the founding fathers of the Waffen-SS. After a few years of Allied captivity he was released to live in West Germany where he devoted himself to writing. Some of his military history works are today considered classics. But his two books devoted to the Waffen-SS, *European Volunteers* and *Army of Outlaws*, brought down the wrath of the establishment historians because they dared to tell the truth. To the minions of academia, the publishing industry and the news media, the soldiers of the Waffen-SS have always been considered 'monsters' and 'criminals,' and anything that has hinted otherwise has always been ruthlessly condemned, if not suppressed outright. Steiner, a highly religious man and a life-long bachelor, died alone in 1966, but he would never be forgotten by those who served under him.

AFTERWORD

"Savage air attacks swept over the town and our bridgehead. Sudden barrages were dropped on our line in order to undermine the morale of the defense. Soviet tanks tried to force their way through to the strongly defended river bank. But it was all in vain. The men whose ancestors had once fought under the Teutonic Knights, who before that had conquered under the Danes and Dutch, threw back the Russian masses and held the tiny Narva bridgehead like a breakwater in the midst of the red flood, forcing the Kremlin to postpone its grandiose plans for the redistribution of the Baltic regions.

"The Estonians fighting for their native land in the ranks of the 20th Waffen SS Division, coined a battle cry which became the watchword of the whole Narva front: "Out of the rubble grows revenge." The Kremlin had little to hope for from these men.

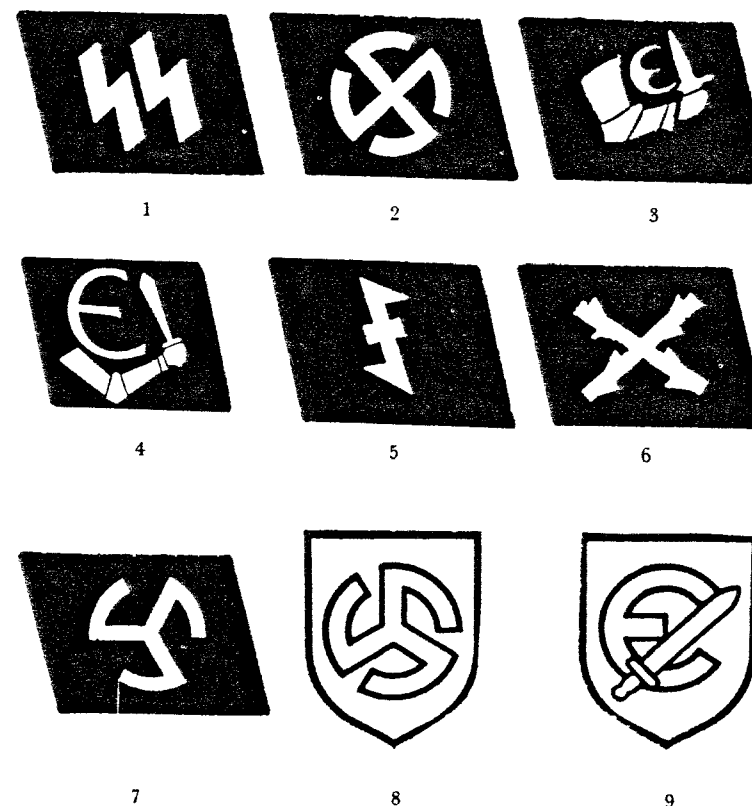
"Side by side with these Estonians, with the Dutch and the Norwegians, the Flemish and the Danes stood men from the German settlements of the south-east, descendants of the old German pioneers and settlers. From the Banat and the fertile Batchka country, from the forests of the Siebenbuergen and the Romanian mountains, they had come here to the far north to defend their families, their homes and their country. Between these men from the south-east and the men from the north and west, fighting together at Narva for the future of Europe itself, there grew up a comradeship and a bond — the bond of a common experience, a common danger, a common fight." *The Dance of Death* by Eric Kern, pp. 176-177.

Perhaps someday, we too — those of us who live comfortably in the "free" West — will realize the great debt that we owe to the Narva front soldiers. They were fighting *our battle* as well!

APPENDIX A

INSIGNIA OF III. SS PANZER CORPS

(1) Standard Waffen-SS runic collarpatch. (2) Collarpatch for 11th SS Division "Nordland." (3 & 4) Collarpatches for 20th SS Division "Estonian." (5) Proposed but never used collarpatch for 23rd SS Division "Nederland." Utilized by the SS Legion "Niederlande," however. (6) Proposed but never used collarpatch for 28th SS Division "Wallonien." (7) Collarpatch of the 27th SS Division "Langemarck," previously used by the Flemish-Danish Regiment "Nordwest" and the "Frickorps Danmark." (8) Emblem of the 27th SS Division "Langemarck." (9) Emblem of the 20th SS Division "Estonian." (10) Emblem of the III. SS Panzer Corps (Germanic). (11) Emblem of the 11th SS Division "Nordland." (12) Emblem of the 23rd SS Division "Nederland." (13 & 14) Emblems of the 28th SS Division "Wallonien." (15) Photograph of rare Estonian SS collarpatch of the 20th Estonian SS Division. (16) Cuff-title awarded to the SS Regiment 48 "General Seyffardt." (17) Cuff-title of the 28th SS Division "Wallonien." (18) Cuff-title of the 27th SS Division "Langemarck." (19) Cuff-title of the 23rd SS Division "Nederland."

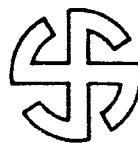


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NARVA 1944



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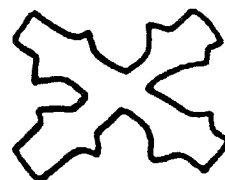
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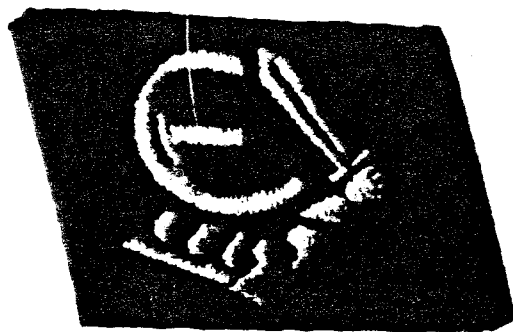
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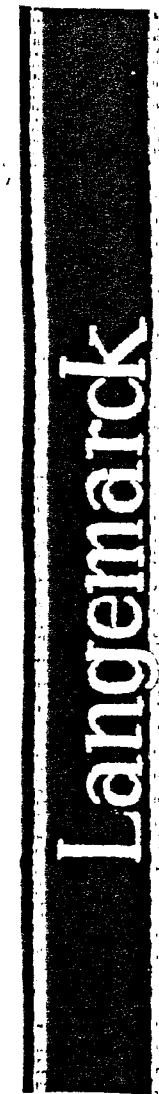
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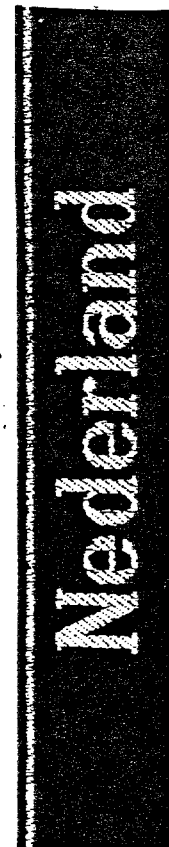
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APPENDIX B

RANK EQUIVALENCY CHART WITH SS ABBREVIATIONS

Waffen-SS	U.S. Army
Reichsfuehrer-SS	General of the Army
SS-Oberst-Gruppenfuehrer und Generaloberst der Waffen-SS	General
SS-Obergruppenfuehrer und General der Waffen-SS (Ogruf.)	Lieutenant General
SS-Gruppenfuehrer und Generalleutnant der Waffen-SS (Gruf.)	Major General
SS-Brigadefuehrer und Generalmajor der Waffen-SS (Brigfhr.)	Brigadier General
SS-Oberfuehrer (Oberfhr.)	Senior Colonel
SS-Standartenfuehrer (Staf.)	Colonel
SS-Obersturmbannfuehrer (Ostuf.)	Lieutenant Colonel
SS-Sturmabteilungsfuehrer (Stubaf.)	Major
SS-Hauptsturmfuehrer (Hstuf.)	Captain
SS-Obersturmfuehrer (Ostuf.)	First Lieutenant
SS-Untersturmfuehrer (Ustuf.)	Second Lieutenant
SS-Sturmscharfuehrer (Stuscha.)	Sergeant Major
SS-Stabschef (Stabscha.)	First Sergeant
SS-Standartenoberjunker (St.Oju.)	Senior Officer
	Candidate
SS-Hauptscharfuehrer (Hscha.)	Master Sergeant
SS-Oberscharfuehrer (Oscha.)	Technical Sergeant
SS-Standartenjunker (St.Ju.)	Officer Candidate
SS-Scharfuehrer (Scharfhr.)	Staff Sergeant
SS-Junker (SS-Ju.)	Appointed Officer
	Candidate-Senior Grade
SS-Unterscharfuehrer (Uscha.)	Sergeant
SS-Rottenfuehrer (Rttfhr.)	Corporal
SS-Fuehrerbewerber	Appointed Officer
	Candidate-Junior Grade
SS-Unterruehreranwaerter	NCO Candidate
SS-Unterruehrerbewerber	NCO Applicant
SS-Sturmann (Strmn.)	Acting Corporal
SS-Oberschuetze (Oschtz.)	Private First Class
SS-Schuetze (Schtz.)	Private
SS-Mann	Private

APPENDIX C

Foreign Volunteer Units of the III. SS Panzer Corps

11. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Nordland"

This division was authorized in February 1943, with its manpower to come from the Dutch, Danish, Norwegian and Flemish SS Legions and the SS Regiment "Nordland" of the 5th SS Division "Wiking." Difficulties arose when political leaders in Flanders and Holland objected to having their soldiers serve in such a multi-national formation; they demanded — and were given — independent national units in the form of the Brigades "Langemarck" and "Nederland." The 11th SS Division therefore became largely a Scandinavian-German unit. It was initially titled "Waraeger" (Varagian), after the Scandinavian warrior-seamen who established a 9th Century Russian dynasty, by Reichsfuehrer-SS Himmler.

On 17 March 1943, Adolf Hitler overruled RF-SS Himmler and issued an order christening a new Germanic SS Division the "Nordland." The Fuehrer felt that "Nordland" was a more appropriate title, and that the name of the heroic "Nordland" SS Regiment deserved to be perpetuated. Picked to command the "Nordland" Division, was Austrian-born Fritz von Scholz, who had previously commanded the "Nordland" Regiment and the 2nd Latvian SS Brigade.

Actual formation of the division did not get underway until late May 1943 at the Grafenwoehr training camp in Bavaria. "Nordland" was composed of the usual divisional detachments plus two panzer-grenadier regiments: "Danmark," built around Danish volunteers from the "Freikorps Danmark," and "Norge," similarly constructed around Norwegian volunteers from the Legion "Norwegen." In terms of nationality, "Nordland" was to be roughly one-third Scandinavian, one-third "Reich" German and one-third "ethnic" German. Quite a few Belgians, Dutchmen, Swiss and Estonians also served in the division.

The Volksdeutsche or ethnic Germans, were the real unsung heroes of the Division "Nordland," the III. SS Panzer Corps, and the Waffen-SS in general. They came from Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and other points throughout Europe thanks to agreements that had been secured by the Reichsfuehrer-SS that permitted (or required), ethnic Germans in various countries to

do their national military service in the Waffen-SS. The ethnic German recruits therefore enabled the Waffen-SS to greatly expand in size even while its own recruiting ability in Germany was strictly limited by the Wehrmacht.

After the very rapid period of training (most "Nordland" soldiers were veterans and did not require extensive training), the "Nordland" Division was committed against Tito's terrorists in Croatia's Sissak-Petrinja area from September to late November 1943. In December 1943, "Nordland" was dispatched to the Oranienbaum Front west of Leningrad. The division retreated to Narva, Estonia in January 1944 and remained in defensive positions in this area until late July 1944 when it relocated to the hilly Tannenberg positions a few miles to the west. In mid-September 1944, "Nordland" began withdrawing to Latvia.

Deployed in the area around Tukkums and Bauske, "Nordland" took part in three major battles for the Kurland "pocket" between October 1944 and February 1945. During the first days of February 1945, "Nordland" was shipped from the port of Libau to Germany. In February and March, the divisional units participated in the difficult Pomeranian defensive fighting around Stargard and in the Altdamm bridgehead near Stettin. On 20 March 1945, "Nordland" was withdrawn to Schwedt-Angermuende for reformation and was temporarily placed in reserve. From 16 April 1945 on, the division found itself engaged in the defense of the capital of the Reich itself, Berlin.

On 17 and 18 April, "Nordland" fell back through Strausberg and Hoppegarten to Berlin, all the while being heavily engaged by the enemy. Part of the division became separated and retreated to the north of the city, but most of "Nordland" took part in the battle for the center of Berlin. On 26 April, the division was reinforced by a volunteer battalion of 300 French SS men and received a new, more vigorous commander in the person of Brigadefuehrer Dr. Gustav Krukenberg. The old "Nordland" commander, Brigadefuehrer Ziegler, had fallen into a lethargic depression after observing the horrors that had been inflicted upon Berlin, and he had been unable to continue functioning in a command role.

"Nordland" fought exceedingly well in the difficult struggle around the Reichschancellery, but on the night of 1/2 May 1945, the commander released his men from any further combat obligations. Efforts to breakout of the surrounded city then

began, but only a few were successful. Most of the "Nordland" survivors wound up in Soviet hands and began the long journey to Siberian slave labor camps. Many of the officers, such as Ostubaf. Kausch, commander of SS Panzer Detachment 11/ "Hermann von Salza," were placed on trial as 'war criminals' and given outrageous sentences. Because of the determined resistance that the "Nordland" troopers displayed in Berlin, the communists held them in captivity longer than most. The last of them, including Ostubaf. Kausch, did not return home until 1956!

Order-of-Battle for

11th SS Division "Nordland":

Field Post Number

Divisional Staff	33 756
SS Signals Detachment 11	43 843
Last Commander: Hstuf. Schnick	
SS Flak Detachment 11	43 111
Last Commander: Stubaf. Kurz	
SS Self-Propelled Gun Detachment 11	32 356
Last Commander: Stubaf. Schulz-Streek	
SS Engineer Battalion 11	38 749
Last Commander: Stubaf. Voss	
SS Panzer Detachment 11 "Hermann von Salza"	32 192
Last Commander: Ostubaf. Kausch	
SS Panzer Regiment 11 (Never fully formed).	42 186
SS Field Replacement Battalion 11	59 858
Last Commander: Ostubaf. Lang	
SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment 23 "Norge" (I.-III. Battalions)	41 891
Last Commander: Ostubaf. Koerbel	
SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment 24 "Danmark" (I.-III. Battalions)	35 408
Last Commander: Hstuf. Ternedde	
SS Artillery Regiment 11 (I.-II. Detachment)	42 973
Last Commander: Ostubaf. Karl	

The I. Battalions of both "Danmark" and "Norge" never re-

turned to the division after being withdrawn for reformation in April 1944. From December 1944, they were attached to the 5th SS Panzer Division "Wiking."

Divisional Commanders:

1 May 1943 to 28 July 1944: Brigfhr. Fritz von Scholz
28 July 1944 to 26 April 1945: Brigfhr. Joachim Ziegler
26 April 1945 to 2 May 1945: Brigfhr. Dr. Gustav Krukenberg

20. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (Estonian Nr. 1)

The Estonian SS Legion was established on 26 August 1942 and began undergoing formation at the SS Troop Training Grounds "Heidelager" on 1 October 1942. By 31 March 1943, the Legion had reached the strength of a regiment and contained 969 Estonian volunteers. Due to a constant influx of new recruits, it was decided to upgrade the Legion to a brigade on 5 May 1943. The old Estonian SS Legion therefore became the 1st Regiment of the new 3rd Estonian SS Volunteer Brigade.

After extensive training and equipping, the 3rd SS Brigade was sent to the Nevel area of the northern sector of the Eastern Front towards the end of 1943. The Estonian SS troops were first sent into action against partisans, but when the Soviets made a major penetration near Nevel, they soon found themselves in the foremost lines! So impressive was the brigade's performance that on 24 January 1944, Reichsfuehrer-SS Himmler ordered it immediately enlarged into a division. While en route to its reformation area in Estonia by rail, the Estonian SS Division was suddenly diverted to more pressing sectors. I. Battalion of the new 45th SS Regiment (formerly the Estonian SS Legion and the 1st Estonian SS Regiment), was dropped off at Dorpat (Tartu) and sent on an emergency basis to the Meerapalu-Mekikoorma area on Lake Peipus. It fought a brilliant — and successful — 10 day defensive action against the communists before returning to the regiment. This battalion, formerly known as SS Btl. "Narwa," had spent most of 1943 with the 5th SS Panzer Division "Wiking" in south Ukraine.

The rest of the 20th SS Division arrived on the Narva River Front in February 1944, just in time to eliminate a dangerous

Soviet bridgehead. From then until 19 September, various parts of the division fought with great distinction at the most critical spots on the Estonian Front. On 20 September, 20th SS Division assembled around Koeru and began a march through Latvia and Lithuania to East Prussia. In October 1944, the division began rebuilding at the SS Troop Training Grounds "Neuhammer" in Silesia.

In January 1945, 20th SS was again in action against the advancing communist forces along the Silesian frontier. Bloody and costly defensive fighting then ensued as the division sacrificed itself around Breslau and Brieg and in the Oppeln-Neisse Pocket in March 1945, where the commander was killed. 20th SS finally retreated to Hirschberg and participated in still more violent engagements throughout the month of April 1945. In the end, after acquitting themselves with great valor on the battlefield, the Estonian SS troops were forced to surrender to the communists in the Melnik area. Some fortunate elements fought their way to the Allied lines in the west, but most of the Estonian soldiers now began a one-way trip to the Gulag death camps. The very large replacement regiment of the division, which had been stationed in Denmark, also surrendered in the west.

Order-of-Battle of the Estonian SS

Estonian SS Legion:	Field Post Number
Staff and Staff Company	48 001
I. Battalion (1.-4. Co's.)	48 314
II. Battalion (5.-8. Co's.)	48 958
III. Battalion (9.-12. Co's.)	48 566
Heavy Mortar Company	48 052
Anti-tank Infantry Company	48 885

The German formation staff for the Legion came from the SS-Totenkopf Replacement Battalion III in Bruenn on 23 November 1942, with some excess German NCOs from the 11th Company/Waffen-SS Special Use Battalion arriving on 21 January 1943. On 23 March, a combat engineer company was added and the Legion was reformed into the 1st Estonian SS Volunteer Grenadier Regiment.

**20. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS
(Estonian Nr. 1):**

Field Post Number

Divisional Staff	59 340
SS Volunteer Grenadier Regiment 45	48 001
I.-III. Battalions	
Commander: Waf.-Stubaf. Haralt Riipalu, Waf.-Ostubaf. Rebane	
SS Volunteer Grenadier Regiment 46	36 341
I.-III. Battalions	
Commander: Waf.-Staf. Tuuling, Waf.-Ostubaf. Paul Maitla	
SS Volunteer Grenadier Regiment 47	22 166
I.-II. Battalions	
Commander: (unknown)	
SS Fusilier Battalion 20 (Recce)	48 312
SS Panzerjaeger Battalion 20 (Anti-tank)	48 886
SS Artillery Regiment 20	48 052
I.-IV. Detachments	
SS Flak Detachment 20	01 199
SS Engineer Battalion 20	17 403
SS Signals Detachment 20	23 417
SS Replacement Regiment 20	38 087

As of May 1944, the Estonian SS Regiments were reclassified "Waffen-Grenadier Regiments."

Divisional Commanders:

1 August 1943 to March 1945: SS-Brigadefuehrer Franz Augsberger
March 1945 to May 1945: SS-Oberfuehrer Berthold Maack

23. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer-Grandier-Division "Nederland"

During the summer of 1943, the SS Legion "Niederlande" was withdrawn from the Eastern Front and sent to Thuringia where it was to be reformed into a regiment of the new SS Division "Nordland." However, at the request of the National Socialist leader of Holland, Anton Mussert, the Dutch SS men were to be granted their own "national" division. On 19 July 1943, the SS Main Leadership Office on the orders of the Fueh-

rer and the RF-SS, authorized the formation of the SS Volunteer Panzer Grenadier Division "Nederland." At this time there were 2500 Dutch veterans from the Legion "Niederlande" on hand and about 3000 new recruits from the Netherlands expected, but the sum total was not enough to constitute a division, so on 26 October 1943, the formation was downgraded to a brigade.

In the autumn of 1943, the Dutch brigade continued its formation in Croatia and battled Tito's cutthroats on the side. On 30 November 1943, the unit was renamed the 4th SS Panzer-Grenadier Brigade "Nederland" and the two regiments in the brigade, 48th and 49th SS, received the titles "General Seyffardt" (named after the founder of the Legion "Niederlande" who was murdered by Dutch terrorists) and "De Ruyter" (also spelled "De Ruiter"; a Dutch admiral who had roundly defeated the British fleet in a previous century), respectively. The brigade was brought up to full strength in the Zagreb area with detached portions alternating on anti-partisan details.

By January 1944, "Nederland" had arrived on the Oranienbaum sector of the Leningrad Front. It spent the year in non-stop combat throughout the Baltic area; first at Narva then later in other parts of Estonia and Latvia. After participating in highly destructive battles in Kurland, the unit, which had been redesignated a division in December 1944, was shipped to Germany from the port of Libau at the end of January 1945. During the sea voyage, the troop transport ship "Moirá" was lost, taking with it many of the Dutch volunteers. The division was reformed quickly in the Stettin area then thrown into the bitter battle for Pomerania. With great skill and courage, the Dutch SS troops fought around Stargard and Gollnow. Almost half of the division was lost to the Reds in the Halbe Pocket near Berlin. The rest of "Nederland" conducted a fighting withdrawal to the Elbe River. At the conclusion of the war, the soldiers of the division that had reached the Elbe, surrendered to the Americans. Those that were captured by the communists faced up to 10 years imprisonment in Siberia, but the ones surrendering to the western "Allies" were not much luckier — most were held in brutal concentration camps in Holland for several years. The mortality rate was high.

The "Nederland" Division fully earned its reputation as an elite formation of the Waffen-SS.

**Order-of-Battle for the 23rd
SS Division "Nederland":**

Field Post Number

Staff	57 720
SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment 48 "General Seyffardt"	40 112
(First I.-III. Battalions later only I.-II. Battalions)	
Last commander: Ostubaf. Scheibe	
SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment 49 "De Ruyter"	59 176
(First I.-III. Battalions later only I.-II. Battalions with another III. Battalion added in 1945).	
Last commander: Ostubaf. Lohmann	
SS Artillery Regiment 54 (I.-II. Detachments)	56 420
Last commander: Ostubaf. Schlueter	
SS Fusilier (Recce) Battalion 54	56 084
Last commander: Ostuf. Kuhne	
SS Self-Propelled Gun Detachment 54 (Anti-Tank)	57 173
Last commander: Hstuf. Aigner	
SS Engineer Battalion 54	58 308
Last commander: Hstuf. Wanhoefer	
SS Signals Company 54 (Expanded to a detachment).	58 949
SS Field Replacement Battalion 54 (Staff plus 5 companies).	40 004
III. Detachment/SS Artillery Rgt. 54 (Added in the fall of 1944).	59 048
Last commander: Stubaf. Hofer (This detachment also contained the division's heavy Flak guns).	

Divisional and Brigade Commander:

1943-1945: Brigadefuehrer Juergen Wagner

27. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Langemarck"

On 31 May 1943, the SS Volunteer Legion "Flandern" was

disbanded and the 6th SS Stormbrigade "Langemarck" took its place, using many of the Legion survivors for its nucleus. Over the next several months, the brigade was in formation at SS training camps in Bohemia. On 26 December 1943, "Langemarck," having been certified for action, was sent by train to the south Ukrainian Front. For the next three months it was heavily engaged in desperate defensive fighting near Zhitomir and Jampol in the vicinity of the SS Kampfgruppe "Das Reich," from the 2nd SS Division. In March 1944, the Flemish brigade became largely surrounded and in the process of a successful breakout attack, took heavy casualties. By April 1944, only 400 of more than 2,000 Flemish volunteers who arrived at the front in January 1944, remained with the brigade.

At the end of April 1944, "Langemarck" was sent back to Bohemia for reformation. On 16 July 1944, the I. Battalion of the brigade, under Hstuf. Rehmann, which was now at full strength was dispatched to the Narva Front in Estonia. The battalion was assigned to defend "Orphanage" Hill to the west of Narva. During its first three days in action (25-27 July), it lost nearly all of its officers. The command of the unit fell to Ustuf. D'Haese. After two months of bitter fighting, the remains of the battalion (130 men of more than 500), left Estonia in late September for Pomerania. All of the survivors were highly decorated.

On 18 September 1944, due to an enormous influx of refugees from Belgium, RF-SS Himmler converted Stormbrigade "Langemarck" into the 27th SS Division. By October, somewhere between 15,000 and 18,000 Flemings had volunteered for the new division. There were so many recruits, that the "Langemarck" training camp on the Lueneburger Heath had trouble accommodating them all. Unfortunately, two-thirds of the volunteers were not soldiers and they needed several months of intensive military training. The "veteran" elements of the division were concentrated in the 66th SS Regiment led by Ostubaf. Schellong, who had commanded the Stormbrigade.

Schellong's regiment became the nucleus of a 3,000 man Kampfgruppe "Langemarck," that was deemed combat worthy. In December 1944, this element entered the Rhineland in the wake of the German Ardennes offensive. Had the attack succeeded, "Langemarck" would have been sent into Flanders. In January 1945, Kampfgruppe "Langemarck" was sent to the Eastern Front and was soon engaged in furious fighting.

For the next few months the unit took part in the following actions:

January 1945: "Langemarck" was heavily engaged around Zachan and took part in the Arnswalde relief effort; it later helped retake and occupy Marienfelden and Reichenbach.

February 1945: The battle-group was engaged in difficult fighting around Zachan and Arnswalde for the entire month.

March 1945: "Langemarck" participated in defensive actions in Lower Pomerania around Moderow-Bansin, Wulkow-Augustwalde and Stargard until 10 March. From 16 March until 19 March it fought in the Stettin-Altdamm bridgehead. Reduced to battalion size, Kampfgruppe "Langemarck" was withdrawn for refitting on 20 March.

April 1945: Refitting continued until 17 April, with the battle-group receiving another regiment and troops from various divisional detachments. On 18 April, KGr. "Langemarck," with a strength of 5,000 to 6,000 troops, was in action on the Oder River Front near Kolbitzow. A few days later the 27th SS Division's "Flemish Hitler Youth" battalion led a dramatic but futile attack towards Berlin from Prenzlau. Soon afterwards "Langemarck" began retreating to the west, north of Berlin.

May 1945: After participating in more excruciating defensive combat, elements of "Langemarck" began surrendering in bits and pieces to the British. Parts of the division were captured by the Soviets.

Flemish SS Order-of-Battle

6. SS Volunteer Stormbrigade "Langemarck"	Field Post Number
Commander: Ostubaf. Conrad Schellong	
Staff Company	44 853
I. Battalion (1.-5. Co's.)	37 965
Commander: Hstuf. Rehmann	
II. Battalion (6.-10. Co's.)	17 662
Commander: Hstuf. Oehms	
11th Company/Field Artillery	37 892
12th Company/Assault Guns	40 035

FOREIGN VOLUNTEER UNITS

6. SS Volunteer Stormbrigade "Langemarck" (continued)	Field Post Number
13th Company/Light Flak	45 214
14th Company/Heavy Flak	21 836
27. SS Volunteer Panzer Grenadier Division "Langemarck":	Field Post Number
Staff and Staff Company	44 853
SS Volunteer Grenadier Regiment 66	04 206
I.-II. Battalions	
Commander: Ostubaf. Conrad Schellong	
SS Volunteer Grenadier Regiment 67	05 294
I.-II. Battalions	
Commander: Stubaf. Otto Hansmann	
SS Volunteer Grenadier Regiment 68	64 712
I.-II. Battalions	
Commander: Hstuf. Stange	
(The "Grenadier" regiments were soon upgraded to "Panzergrenadier" regiments).	
SS Artillery Regiment 27	05 814
I.-III. Detachments	
Commander: Ostubaf. Holger Arentoft	
SS Fusilier Battalion 27 (Recce)	05 150
SS Anti-Tank Detachment 27	21 836
Commander: Hstuf. Eckehard Wangemann	
SS Engineer Battalion 27	66 467
Commander: Hstuf. Heinrich Bauch	
SS Signals Detachment 27	44 853
Commander: Hstuf. Karl Kauss	
SS Field Replacement Battalion 27	65 597
SS Supply and Reserve Regiment 27	66 752
Commander: Stubaf. Scheingraeber	

Divisional Commander:

18 September 1944 to 9 May 1945: Standartenfuehrer Thomas Mueller.

Other "Langemarck" battalion commanders:

I./SS Rgt. 66: Stubaf. Johannes Oehms
 I./SS Rgt. 67: Hstuf. Wilhelm Rehmann
 II./SS Rgt. 67: Hstuf. Werner Poehle
 I./SS Rgt. 68: Hstuf. Krabbe
 II./SS Rgt. 68: Hstuf. De Mulder
 I./SS Art.Rgt. 27: Stubaf. Der On
 II./SS Art.Rgt. 27: Hstuf. Zink
 III./SS Art.Rgt. 27: Stubaf. De Bruyn

28. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wallonien"

After discussions with the Wehrmacht High Command, RF-SS Himmler ordered the formation of the SS-Sturmbrigade "Wallonien" to commence effective 1 June 1943. The core of the unit consisted of the survivors of the Legion "Wallonie," who now transferred out of the control of the German Army proper into the Waffen-SS. In the course of the summer and fall of 1943, the new brigade (soon numbered 5th SS Brigade), was rapidly formed and trained. In November 1943, "Wallonien" was dispatched to the Dneiper Plains on the southern part of the Eastern Front where it was subordinated to the 5th SS Panzer Division "Wiking."

In December 1943 and January 1944, the brigade saw heavy fighting, and at the end of January, it was trapped in the Cherkassy Pocket along with the "Wiking" Division. On 17 February, "Wallonien" achieved a successful breakout but lost all of its heavy weapons in the process. Of more than 2,000 Walloons who had arrived at the front three months earlier, all but 632 had become casualties. The first brigade commander, Stubaf. Lucien Lippert, was killed in action at Cherkassy.

During the spring of 1944, "Wallonien" was rebuilt at the Wildflecken SS Training Grounds and in August, the first combat ready battalion of the brigade totalling 450 men was dispatched to the Estonian sector of the Eastern Front. Only a handful of men came out of this fighting unscathed, but the entire battalion was decorated for heroism!

On 20 September 1944, the "Wallonien" Brigade began forming into the 28th SS Division, first in the Breslau area then later in South Hannover and Braunschweig. Several thousand Belgian refugees, Spaniards and Frenchmen flocked to join the new divi-

sion, to a large extent due to the reputation of its commander, Ostubaf. Leon Degrelle — a famous political leader who had proven himself a true front line hero!

After a brief sortie by part of the division into the Belgian Ardennes in December 1944, the most combat ready elements were formed into a 4,500 man battle-group that was divided into two regiments. By the end of January 1945, the "Wallonien" battle-group was in action on the Pomeranian Front near Stargard and Stettin. From 5 February to 11 March, "Wallonien" fought hard battles around Stargard and Altdamm, often with the Flemish SS Kampfgruppe "Langemarck" as its closest neighbor. From 12 March to the middle of April, the Walloons participated in the defense of the city of Stettin and were in fact, the last defenders to leave that doomed city.

In mid-April 1945, Kampfgruppe "Wallonien" was reinforced by Belgian soldiers from training camps in Austria and west Germany. For the first time the unit actually took on the semblance of a division with a strength of around 7,000 men. The "Wallonien" also received one weak German artillery regiment and one weak German infantry regiment. The nationality breakdown was therefore as follows: 4,000+ Walloons, 2,000+ Germans and several hundred Frenchmen with the balance comprised of some Spaniards and various other nationalities. But as furious fighting continued to rage north of Berlin, Staf. Degrelle was forced to reform the "Wallonien" to keep pace with its severe losses. In the end, the division consisted of a front line regiment spearheaded by Stubaf. Derriecx's "storm" battalion, and a reserve regiment made up of the sick, the lightly wounded and the clerical personnel. In vicious combat around Prenzlau, the "Wallonien" Division was shattered into little pieces. Parts surrendered to the Russians and the Americans, while 800 of the Walloons made their way to Denmark before eventually capitulating. By the war's end about 4,000 Walloon volunteers had been killed on the Eastern Front.

Order-of-Battle of the Wallonian SS Formations

5th SS Stormbrigade "Wallonien":

Staff and Staff Company
 I. Battalion with 1.-4. Companies

II. Battalion with 5.-8. Companies
 Infantry Gun/Artillery Company
 Anti-tank Company
 2 Flak Companies
 Field Replacement Company

Commanders:

Stubaf. Lippert from June 1943 to February 1944
 Stubaf. Degrelle from February 1944 to September 1944

28th SS Volunteer-Panzer-Grenadier Division "Wallonien":

Staff
 SS Volunteer Grenadier Regiment 69
 SS Volunteer Grenadier Regiment 70
 SS Volunteer Grenadier Regiment 71
 SS Anti-tank Detachment 28 (Including some assault guns).
 SS Artillery Regiment 28
 SS Engineer Battalion 28
 SS Signals Detachment 28

Divisional commander:

September 1944 to May 1945: Standartenfuehrer Leon Degrelle

Accurate lists of field post numbers and unit commanders for the "Wallonien" Division were not available to the author.

III. SS Panzer Corps' Unit Strengths as of 20 September 1944

III. SS Panzer Corps' Staff and Corps Troops:
 100 officers, 487 NCOs, 1,957 men, 19 auxiliaries.
 Total: 2,544 (Authorized strength: 4,466)
 11th SS Frw.Pz.Gr.Div. "Nordland":
 328 officers, 1,818 NCOs, 8,334 men, 284 auxiliaries.
 Total: 10,889 (Authorized strength: 16,561)
 4th SS Frw.Pz.Gr. Brigade "Nederland":
 178 officers, 1,170 NCOs, 5,182 men, 113 auxiliaries.
 Total: 6,530 (Authorized strength: 8,960)
 20th Waf.Gr.Division der SS "Estonian":

439 officers, 1,978 NCOs, 12,965 men, 566 auxiliaries.
 Total: 15,382 (Authorized strength: 14,698)
 (Because the Division was already well over strength, three battalions were not even included in the above figures.)
 5th SS Frw.-Sturmbrigade "Wallonien":
 70 officers, 265 NCO, 1,230 men.
 Total: 1,565 (Authorized strength: 2,556)
 6th SS Frw.-Sturmbrigade "Langemarck":
 46 officers, 236 NCOs, 1,659 men, 16 auxiliaries.
 Total: 1,941 (Authorized strength: 2,554)

The two Belgian brigades were greatly expanded in the coming months as they were transformed into divisions. For instance, "Langemarck" grew to a strength of between 15,000 and 18,000 soldiers, while "Wallonien" was about half as much.

The "auxiliaries" were nearly always Russian "Helpers" who had joined the German side.

Selective Bibliography and Acknowledgements

There is not enough room to list all of the works that have been consulted for *Narva 1944*, but it is fair to say that this book would not have been written without the assistance of Wilhelm Tieke's excellent history of the III. SS Panzer Corps, *Tragoedie um die Treue*, Munin-Verlag, 3rd printing, 1978. Also heavily relied upon were many, many issues of the Waffen-SS veteran's magazine "Der Freiwillige," 1965 to date.

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The author is the editor and publisher of a quarter journal, "Siegrunen: The Waffen-SS in Historical Perspective," "Siegrunen" is the only English-language historical journal devoted to the Waffen-SS. Subscription rates for the journal: \$20.00 per four issues for individuals and \$30.00 per four issues for libraries and universities. Subscriptions should be sent to Siegrunen, Box 70, Mt. Reuben Road, Glendale, Oregon 97442.