



Siegrunen

THE WAFFEN-SS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE



Soldiers of the 7th SS Mountain Division "Prinz Eugen" secure some local intelligence in this never before published photo, courtesy of Kenneth Nieman.

EDITORIAL

Descent Into Darkness

"... those who fought against fascism are allies still in that fight."

"... Hitlerite crimes cannot be forgotten and [the] fight against fascism cannot be allowed to subside."

"... any victory for Hitlerite criminals, anywhere in the world, is a defeat for those who oppose fascism. Demjanjuk is only one man, but he has come to symbolize the efforts of anti-fascist peoples to bring Hitlerite criminals to justice."

"Those efforts [to fight fascism] continue today between the United States and the Soviet Union in the spirit that you [Rekunkov] and General Rudenko expressed so eloquently to me in 1980 ..."

All the above excerpted from a letter from former U.S. Government Official Allan A. Ryan, Jr. to "The Honorable" Aleksandr Rekunkov, Procurator General of the USSR, dated 30 May 1986.

For the record, Rekunkov was a secret police thug under Stalin, who worked his way up the ladder. Ryan

was the first "commissar" of the notorious Office for Special Investigations of the U.S. "Justice" Department. I had once thought it would be cute sarcasm to refer to Ryan as a "commissar," but from the looks of things it is a title he would probably be quite proud to bear. The purpose of the letter was to secure a fabricated Identification Card to be used in the Zionist show trial being carried out against the hapless Ukrainian-American John Demjanjuk in Israel (or more properly occupied-Palestine).

Ryan's comments really speak for themselves; certainly emblematic of a bizarre fantasy world constructed by a deluded mind. One would have to think that Rekunkov would have either been puzzled by or gotten a good laugh out of the letter since most of the language in it went out the window with his ex-boss Stalin some 34 years ago! Amazing how someone like John Demjanjuk, who would never have been considered a "Nazi" by the real "Nazis" could suddenly become a symbol of "Hitlerite" criminals.

In due course the ID card arrived at Mr. Demjanjuk's "trial"; it proved to be the only one of its kind known in the world since no other card remotely similar to it has ever been found! Of course it also contained German grammatical errors that would not have appeared in the Third Reich era. But fraudulent? Perish the thought! The poor old fellow was a dead duck from day one, although not one scintilla of hard evidence exists to convict him of swatting flies much less murdering 950,000 people! His "trial" quickly degenerated into an emotional circus discussing some of the more bizarre atrocities of the so-called "holocaust"; much weeping and wailing have prevailed but as usual facts are nowhere to be seen!

I guess if I had been responsible for "Nazi Death Camps" the first guy I would pick to run the operation would be a 20 year old captured enemy alien who doesn't even speak my language and had been categorized by some as coming from a "sub-human" ethnic group. Sure thing!

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Following up on the above, it was even more ghastly to witness the brutal deportation of the Estonian-American Karl Linnas on 20 April 1987 (nice timing!) to the Soviet Union. There was even less evidence against Linnas' "criminality" than even what was fabricated against John Demjanjuk. This was such a purely ugly story that I cannot even stomach writing about it. Suffice to say that at one point in the forced deportation Linnas had to be "brought under control" by drugs administered by U.S. Federal Marshalls. That alone, I guess, shows that we've come a long way; 40 years ago he would have simply been slammed over the head with a gun butt together with other victims of "Operation Keelhaul" (i.e., refugees whom we sent to Soviet Death Camps).

For all of the details of the whole sickening story of the treatment of Karl Linnas please send \$1.00 to The Thunderbolt, P.O. Box 1211, Marietta GA 30061 and ask for Issue #318.

Our very "human rights" oriented government has now seen fit to forcibly deport "Hitlerite war criminals" (all of whom had no criminal record at all while living in the U.S., and were outstanding citizens, which ought to disprove their "criminality" right there!), to such "bas-

tions of liberty" as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Israel. None of these countries has very much in the way of civil or human rights; each, as presently constituted, was founded by terrorists and each one of the above states has engaged in the occasional slaughter of and/or deportation of the indigenous population that fell under their control. Each of the above also murdered or expelled ethnic-Germans that lived in territories they conquered (try and find out what the "Israelis" did to the Palestinian-Germans if you can - this is another historical blackout firmly in place!). And each and every one of the above has been supported to the hilt by the U.S. government and taxpayer throughout their sordid existences, despite occasional hostile rhetoric between the parties concerned. So I guess it is no surprise that we would still join with them in a war against East European "Hitlerites"! But the least we could do is to "can" the hypocrisy about "human rights"; the OSI campaign is simply a dirty political vendetta aimed at "getting even" with some people who quite inadvertently caused some degree of inconvenience to the international Marxists and their allies.

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The "Newsweek" article covering the Linnas Deportation was even more hysterical and factually deficient than normal for that publication. The writers ended the piece in a blood-thirsty manner, virtually calling for the lynching of Karl Linnas. No one ever pauses to wonder why on earth the "Nazis" would have placed a 21 year old foreign national in charge of an important "death" camp. The sole evidence against Linnas came in the form of four video depositions provided by the Soviet Secret Police; one of which was made by a brain-damaged person! No documents exist to verify Linnas' position as the head of a "death" camp; in fact, the so-called "death" camp remains undocumented!

The side-bar to the "Newsweek" piece listed a number of other people currently under the persecution of the OSI; they were all described in the most prejudiced, emotional terms possible and the Waffen-SS was carefully linked to "death" camps in one such paragraph. Among others, the former Ostufaf. Conrad Schellong, who commanded the "Langemarck" Brigade and held the Knight's Cross, was slandered as a "death camp commander" in the 1930s. Schellong has been fighting OSI efforts to deport him for several years now. There were, of course, no "death camps" in existence at all in the 1930s and although Schellong served for a time in the SS-Totenkopf-verbände he was never affiliated with guard units or spent any time in the "concentration camps" that did exist then. But the establishment reporters could care less about the facts; never once has his outstanding war-time career or fine record as a U.S. citizen been mentioned!

The OSI is also still after the Latvian war hero and Knight's Cross holder, Zanis Butkus, who served in the Latvian SS Legion. After spending hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars trying to frame him, the OSI "officially" closed his case some time ago. Now they will neither confirm nor deny that they are back after him. The witch-hunting secret police agents have been desperately trying to link him to some sort of possible act of violence against the "heroic Red partisans." To date they have had little success since our Soviet pals have no file on Butkus (he went underground during their first reign of terror in Latvia in 1940/41), and there are simply no witnesses, fake or otherwise, to any alleged crimes committed against the Communist terrorists. This due to the fact that the "partisans" in the areas where the Latvians operated had no local civilian support, and were thankfully,

almost totally eliminated. Butkus has now left his home in Milwaukee for Alaska; one can only hope he left no forwarding address!

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As of this writing the OSI has caused at least three suicides by innocent people whom they had harassed and has ruined the lives of many other fine citizens and their families, all with no remorse or even apologies expressed. It is clearly time that this abomination be permanently abolished and its personnel held to account for the crimes and violations of human and civil rights that they seem to have been responsible for. Due to the political pressures involved this scenario is not about to come to pass, so for the time being at least, the descent into darkness continues.

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It is my own personal opinion that all alleged "war criminals" of all nations of the World War II era be finally "amnestied" so that they can speak openly and freely about what actually may have taken place. It is about time the air was finally cleared once and for all. Let there be free and open inquiry into all of the controversial events of that time frame; let all of the still currently sealed government files be opened and let the truth speak for itself! Unfortunately the victorious parties and the "Nazi hunters" aren't about to permit any real free speech or inquiry into this area. Only what they say happened is permitted. One can only wonder why. What are they afraid of?

- Richard Landwehr

Upcoming Articles

Starting in SR #44 and continuing for at least two or three issues will be: "Parachute Battalion: The History of SS-Fallschirmjaeger-Bataillon 500/600" by Antonio Munoz. This is the most detailed account to ever appear on the subject and is military-historical writing at its finest. It just doesn't get any better than this! I am most honored to be able to present this piece in SIEGRUNEN. Many maps, illustrations and photos will accompany it.

Also on tap: Histories of the first 29th SS Division (RONA-Russian Nr.1), the SS Artillery Rgt. 27/"Langemarck," the Air Defense Units of the 11th SS Division "Nordland," the Smoke Producing Unit of the Waffen-SS (one of the oddest, to say the least!) and much, much more. In addition, Steve Kane looks at the individual surrenders and fates of all of the Waffen-SS Divisions in a well documented article and also will present a splendid guide to all of the individual Waffen-SS Regiments. Also on hand is a fine article on "The 1st SS Panzer Division in the Ardennes, 1944" by Charles H. Bogart. On top of this there will be more material on the Serbian Volunteer Corps (including the memoirs of a veteran of that formation) and so many other things I cannot even begin to list them! Needless to say it is material you will have a hard time finding anywhere else!

SPECIAL NOTE

The Latvian SS articles in this issue were actually written before the availability of Latvian Legion by Arthur Silgailis in an English text edition, so there is some overlap in material here, but also much additional information in parts. Latvian Legion compliments this issue perfectly, particularly in regards to maps and photos and can be ordered from our Book Service on page 4.

- R.L.

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Pre-Publication Prices on Planned Books for 1987
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 The Croatian and Hungarian Waffen-SS - \$5.00
 Charlemagne's Legionnaires: French Volunteers of the Waffen-SS (a full-length book) - \$14.00

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WAFFEN-SS BOOKS

by Antonio Munoz

I am starting off this list of books on the Waffen-SS with one which I consider one of the most important and valuable books to come out from Germany in recent years. It's entitled Europaische Freiwillige Im Bild (European Volunteers in Pictures). This oversized book is simply a masterpiece of photographic and literary writing! With 310 large pages and 611 (count them!) illustrations, this book is the definitive work on all of the volunteers which served in the ranks of the Waffen-SS. The pictures are not the typical re-hash of worn out illustrations which make up the typical foreign picture book, but include very rare, never seen pictures, many from the files of personal collections from the volunteers themselves! Beautifully done, the book even has a very handsome and attractive dust jacket with a burgundy background and gold lettering. In the center of the front page dust jacket is a large rectangular beige box which includes in all the colors known to man, the exact armshields of 15 different volunteer formations. The book includes all of the armshields for each formation and overall, it's very pleasing to look at! The best part is this: the book is in both German and English! This book will definitely become a classic, so I urge all serious students of the Waffen-SS (and for that matter, of the Second World War) to get this one! The price range is very fair considering the Rolls Royce that you are getting. If you bought Bruce Quarrie's latest book, Hitler's Teutonic Knights, you should compare the two to see what crap and gold look like together.

There are two books which will soon be released by the people from Munin Verlag. The first one is called Panzer Kampf Im Bild (Tank Battles in Pictures). This one deals with the battles of the Waffen-SS tank units in WWII. It will contain around 400 pages and will include not only a large photographic history, but a text as well. Again, the text will be in German/English. Hundreds of illustrations are promised though the publishers have not yet stated how many. The price range can be expected to be close to \$40.00 (maybe less). A second book also in the works from the same people is the title Militarischer Fuhrenachwuchs der Waffen-SS (Military Officer Academies of the Waffen-SS). This 216 page book contains 143 very rare illustrations of the SS Officer Academies and their recruits. The dust jacket is done in Prussian blue, with white and black lettering. In addition, the SS Junker-Schule Bad-Folz armshield is depicted on the front dust jacket. This book is also still not available, but will be soon. The price range will certainly be smaller than \$40.00, and as in Europaische Freiwillige, it is oversized and in German/English! When it comes out, this one can also be expected to become a collector's item. Look out for it.

A third book which comes from Munin Verlag is one that was published in 1986. This book is entitled Fallschirmjaeger der Waffen-SS Im Bild (Paratroopers of the Waffen-SS in Pictures). It is also oversized, and in German/English. Its dust jacket is in light blue, with the words in black and white. The front dust jacket also includes a very beautiful illustration of paratroopers making an opposed landing. The paratrooper assault badge is also pictured in the front dust jacket. It is featured in gold and silver (as it originally was made). The book features 226 illustrations, many never before seen, of

the SS paratroopers in action not only in Yugoslavia, but in the East. The book is 152 pages long, and does justice to the only SS paratroop battalion to be formed: "SS-Fallschirmjaeger-Bataillon 500/600." The prices vary on this book, so shop around.

A book which was released back in 1967, and was reprinted in 1985, is put out by K.W. Schutz and is entitled Das Auge der Division (The Eye of the Division). It is a very detailed book on the history of the reconnaissance battalion of the 17.SS-Panzer Grenadier-Division "Goetz von Berlichingen." The dust jacket shows a section of these men in camouflaged Schwimmwagen. The author, Helmut Gunther was an SS-Untersturmfuehrer (lieutenant) in the battalion, and is thus in a very good position to describe this unit from its inception in Loire, France to its capitulation in Germany. The book has 368 pages, 11 maps, a brief outline of the unit's activities at the back of the book (the text, of course, is detailed and thorough). The battalion commanders are also listed, even down to naming every man in the battalion! Strengths and order of battles are, of course, included. There are also 8 documents at the end of the book. There are also 63 illustrations, many action shots never before seen. This does not include the photo of the author (as seen in 1944) on the inside dust jacket. Again, prices will range, so shop around!

A very nice little hardcover book which is also put out by K.W. Schutz is entitled Die 3. Kompanie (The 3rd Company). It is the history of the 3rd Company/12.SS Panzer Regiment as told by the members of this unit. It contains 152 pages, 11 maps, plus endpaper maps, and has 54 illustrations. If you want to know in detail what it was like to be in an SS tank company, this is the book to get. The price may vary, but you should be able to find it for around \$15.00.

A new release which made its way to the U.S. shores this year is a very good photo-documentary entitled

NEW BOOK TITLES

HITLER'S GLADIATOR: The Life of SS-Oberst-Gruppenfuehrer Sepp Dietrich. 250 pp., 30 photos. Signed by the author, Charles Messenger, upon request. \$31.00.
 FIRE-FEU-FEUER-VUUR/LES PANZERS DE PEIPER A L'US ARMY. Multi-lingual photo book of SS Panzers in the Ardennes in 1944. 128 pp., 177 photos, many fine maps. \$21.95.
 KNIGHTS OF THE BLACK CROSS: Hitler's Panzer Force. 266 pp., 41 photos, maps. \$26.50
 THE WAFFEN-SS 1933-45. Scholarly study by a German professor. Now in English. 352 pp but no photos. \$46.00
 STURMARTILLERIE IM BILD 1940-45. A pictorial history of German assault guns in WWII. 369 pp., 760 photos, lists of award holders, etc. \$48.95
 Send for our new German WWII catalogue for \$2.00 a copy, airmailed directly.

The History Bookshop
 2 The Broadway
 Friern Barnet Road
 London N11 3DU
 GREAT BRITAIN

Divisionen Der Waffen-SS Im Einsatz 1940-1945 (Divisions of the Waffen-SS in Action 1940-1945). This new photo-documentary was produced by Herbert Walther, the man who gave us the classic, Die Waffen-SS, Ein Bilddokumentation. This new book is the much awaited sequel with all new illustrations. The dust jacket is done in black with white lettering (like in his previous book), but an illustration of a Waffen-SS trooper in camouflage clothing adorns the front page dust jacket. It contains 240 pages and has well over 400 illustrations. At the beginning of the book there is a very nice rank list showing all the insignia worn by the SS troopers from Reichfuehrer-SS all the way down to SS-Schutze. The book stresses the histories of the Leibstandarte, Das Reich, Totenkopf, Wiking, Florian Geyer, and Hitler Jugend Divisions, with a section specially dedicated to the European volunteers.

Both volumes, which are still in print, by this author should make a very definitive photo historical archive on the history of the Waffen-SS. The price of this book should be about \$25.00, though I have seen it selling for as high as \$31.00 in your "better hobby shops."

Well, that's all for now, but there are a lot of books out there which the readers of SIEGRUNEN should know about. Last time I reviewed a bomb by Bruce Qurrie. This time I managed to show you some books worth spending your money on. Happy reading!

- Antonio J. Munoz, R.T.R.

Editor's Note: The above titles and many others can be obtained from Munoz Books, P.O. Box 7088, Flushing NY 11352. They also offer a subscription service to "Der Freiwillige," the Waffen-SS veterans' magazine in the German language, at \$36.00 per year (11 issues). §

FLEMISH WAFFEN-SS KRIEGSBERICHTERS (WAR REPORTERS)

In the course of WWII, each nationality that served in the Waffen-SS was carefully covered by war reporters of the same nationality who fed stories and photographs back to the press in the appropriate country. From a public relations and information standpoint the W-SS Kriegsberichters were clearly quite a success story and much of their outstanding work lives on today in the numerous books that continue to appear on the Waffen-SS. The Flemings had more than their share of war correspondents. A breakdown of the Flemish SS KB personnel in the course of the war, looks like this:

Writers: Around 50 (many affiliated with Belgian newspapers)
Radio Reporters: 14
Radio Technicians: 2
Still Photographers: 6
Movie (Newsreel) Cameramen: 2
Artists: 3
Technical Services: 6

The leader of the SS-KB office in Brussels, which helped select volunteers for this duty was SS-Oberjunker Ernst Viebuecher. Eventually the SS-KB were assigned to the overall control of the SS-Standarte "Kurt Eggers" with offices in Berlin. The staff of this "regiment" received the stories and photos from the field, and selected from them what to send on to the press in Germany and occupied and allied countries. The "Standarte" was based in a barracks/bunker complex (to escape air raids), at Berlin-Gruenheide in 1944 and at least two Flemings were assigned to the staff in the course of that year.

Flemish SS-KB Units
SS-KB Squad/Volunteer Legion Flandern, 1941-43
6 war correspondents
1 photographer

1 artist
1 radio reporter
1 "other"
Total strength: 10

SS-KB Half-Platoon/6.SS-STurmbrigade "Langemarck"
Based in Cerevinnevka (circa February 1944)
Platoon Leader: SS-Oberscharfuehrer Raf van Hulse
Clerical "officer": SS-Unterscharfuehrer Juul Wijters
7 war correspondents
4 radio reporters
4 photographers
2 movie cameramen
2 artists
1 radio technician
2 drivers
Total strength: 26

SS-KB Platoon/27.SS-Frw.Pz.Gr.Div. "Langemarck"
Platoon Leader: SS-Untersturmfuhrer Jan Buyse
3 war correspondents
1 artist (until 5 April 1945)
4 photographers
6 drivers
Total strength: 15 known (may have been more)

The size of the divisional KB contingent was smaller than that of the Brigade essentially because from September 1944, Belgium was an "enemy" occupied country and the only media reports went to publications in Germany. At least four newspapers including "Free Flanders," were still printed in Germany for the Flemish refugee community and they continued to carry the Flemish SS-KB reports. Flemish SS war reporters did serve with other W-SS units, including two of them with the SS Police Division in 1942. §



WAFFEN-SS PERSONALITY PROFILE



SS-Hauptsturmfuehrer
HANS-GOESTA PEHRSSON

Hans-Goesta Pehrsson was born in Karlskrona, Sweden in 1910; he was a chemist by profession. In July 1941 he volunteered for service with the Freikorps Danmark and ended up on the Lake Ilmen front as an NCO and commander of a machine gun platoon. In 1943 he attended and graduated from the SS-Junkerschule Toelz and was posted to 3rd Company ("Swedish Company")/SS Armored Recce Detachment 11/11th SS Division "Nordland," where he served initially as a platoon leader.

On 30 January 1944, both Pehrsson and the 3rd Co. commander, Ostuf. Walter Kaiser, were wounded to the east of Narva, Estonia, and command of the company and platoons passed over entirely to NCOs. A few days earlier on 25 January, the leader of IV. Platoon/3rd Co. (virtually all-Swedish in composition), Oberscharfuehrer Walter Nilsson, was killed near Rogovitzky during the relocation of the "Nordland" Div. from the Oranienbaum Pocket to the Narva River.

Upon the death of Ostuf. Kaiser on 19 April 1944 at Narva, Ostuf. Pehrsson assumed command of 3rd Company, temporarily relinquishing it in July 1944 to the German Ostuf. Hermann Ahrens from the "Wiking" Division. Ahrens was subsequently killed-in-action on or about 29 July 1944 in the vicinity of Ponomonok, Estonia and Pehrsson had to rush back to again take over the company. He would hold command more or less continuously until the end of the war.

In May/June 1944, Pehrsson (who had already privately conceded that the war was lost), helped some young and demoralized Swedish and Estonian ethnic Swedes in his company desert to Sweden so that their attitude would not permeate the company and so that they would not be punished by the Germans as well had they been caught trying to desert on their own.

At Preekuln in Kurland, Latvia in October 1944, Ostuf. Pehrsson and 12 men of his command counterattacked a strong Soviet force that had penetrated the "Nordland" lines, and not only managed to regain the old positions but capture some 100 enemy soldiers as well. After the

action, Pehrsson noticed that his company was out of liquid refreshments, so he radioed the following message to Stubaf. Rudolf Saalbach, the detachment commander: "Positions retaken. If you don't bring a crate of Schnaps over here pronto the positions will be abandoned!" Saalbach responded by personally bringing over the liquor and in turn advising Pehrsson that he was now obligated to hold the lines for as long as required.

As it turned out, Ostuf. Pehrsson and his handful of soldiers managed to hold on to the main positions for the next eight days, despite extreme enemy pressure and constant fighting. A measure of the defensive effort that was put out could be seen in the seven T-34 tanks that the SS men knocked out in close combat before the bunker line. For his deeds during this time period, Ostuf. Pehrsson was mentioned in the Wehrmacht Roll of Honor and decorated with the coveted Honor Roll Clasp on 25 December 1944.

On 15 April 1945, Hans-Goesta Pehrsson was promoted to Hauptsturmfuehrer and made Ic (intelligence officer) on the staff of the "Nordland" Division under Brigadefuehrer Ziegler, while still retaining command of what was left of his old company. On 27 April 1945, during the height of the battle for Berlin, Hstuf. Pehrsson and part of his 3rd Co./SS Recce Det. 11, including three armored cars, were sent to the Reichschancellery where they were assigned to the staff of Brigfhr. Moehnke, who was trying to coordinate the defense of the city center. During the general escape attempt at the Weidendammer bridge on the night of 1/2 May, Hstuf. Pehrsson and his Swedish driver were both wounded when their vehicle took a direct hit from enemy tank guns and they were later captured by the Soviets. In June 1945, Pehrsson had recovered from his wounding and during a lapse in security, managed to escape from captivity and eventually return to Sweden. He died there in Stockholm in 1974, following a long illness.

Hstuf. Pehrsson was an officer who was well respected and trusted by his men. Although obviously sympathetic to the objectives of Germany in regards to international communism, he was far from a political fanatic and proved to be a natural soldier and leader. On the other hand he was not much of an athlete and he was remembered by a comrade as fairly ineffectual in the daily soccer matches that were held when the "Nordland" recce detachment was at rest behind the lines.

NOW AVAILABLE!

Audio Cassette on

The Waffen-SS and the Malmedy Trial

as presented by Ray Merriam at
the 2nd International Revisionist Conference.
Includes "The European Volunteer Movement in WWII"
by Richard Landwehr.

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Box 512
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Hstuf. Hans-Goesta Pehrsson's decorations included the Honor Roll Clasp of the German Army, the Close Combat Clasp in Silver, the Wound Badge in Silver and both grades of the Iron Cross. He was the most highly decorated and most prominent Swedish volunteer in the Waffen-SS.



SS-Brigadefuehrer
Dr. OSKAR HOCK

Oskar Hock was born in Babenhausen, Hesse, on 31 January 1898. He was the son of medical Doctor Valentin Hock, who also served as a government district physician. Hock's forebearers had largely been farmers around Grossostheim near Aschaffenberg. In March 1917, Hock completed his secondary schooling and enlisted in the Imperial German Army, serving in the frontlines as a communications man.

From August to October 1918, Hock attended and successfully completed a training course for officer aspirants, but the war ended before he could gain a commission. He was released from the service in early 1919 as an NCO and "officer candidate." In April 1919, Hock joined the Free Corps "Goetel-Passau" and participated in the battles that overthrew the so-called "Red Republic" in Munich. Afterwards he attended the University of Wuerzburg where he studied medicine.

In 1923, Hock passed his doctor's examination and began an internship at the Ludwigshafen city hospital which lasted until 1925. He then launched his own private practice in the town of Regen. In 1928 he joined the new National Socialist Worker's Party and its local S.A. (Stormtroopers) detachment. From 1929 to 1934 he served as the Party representative in Regen and also functioned as the medical officer for S.A. Sturmbann (Battalion) III./20.

With an eye towards securing a government position, Dr. Hock took a special instructional course in medical administrative procedures at the State Medical Academy in Munich in 1933. He received his government accreditation in 1934 and on the 1st of August of that year became the official district physician for the town of Lindau on Lake Constance. From August 1935 on he was the public health officer for the entire surrounding area.

On 1 August 1936, Dr. Hock offered his services to the armed SS (SS-VT), and was accepted for duty and given the rank of Sturmbannfuehrer (Major). For the next couple of years he served as the commander of the SS Medical Staffs in Dachau-Munich and Berlin, receiv-

ing a promotion to Obersturmbannfuehrer on 12 September 1937. Following the annexation of Austria, Ostuf. Dr. Hock was posted to the medical staff of the SS-VT in Vienna and he became a medical officer for the new Austrian armed SS Standarte "Der Fuehrer." He became the official SS-VT garrison doctor in Vienna on 1 December 1938 and he held this post until 19 October 1939, when he sought and obtained his release from military service for personal reasons.

It was not long, however, before Dr. Hock rejoined the armed SS; being again accepted for duty on 13 January 1940 with his old rank restored. But he now received an entirely different assignment. From 16 January 1940 to 15 August 1940, Dr. Hock worked for the medical branch of the Concentration Camp Inspectorate (bear in mind this was well before conditions had deteriorated to unhealthy levels in these camps). In late August 1940 he moved over to a medical staff position in the Waffen-SS Inspectorate.

On 30 January 1941, Dr. Hock was promoted to Standartenfuehrer (Colonel) and was temporarily assigned to the SS Medical Office in Berlin. Then on 15 February 1941 he was appointed the chief medical officer (divisional surgeon) of the SS "Totenkopf" Division. This would be his post for more than two years. During this time he took part in all of the "Totenkopf" Division's actions on the Russian Front, serving often in close proximity to the frontlines. In the process he was wounded and was awarded the WWII clasp to his WWI Iron Cross, 2nd Class and the Iron Cross, 1st Class for heroic actions under fire.

Dr. Hock was promoted to Oberfuehrer (senior Colonel) on 9 November 1942 and remained on duty with the SS-"T" Division until 21 June 1943 when he was appointed the head of the Waffen-SS Medical Procedures office. This was followed by a rapid promotion to Brigadefuehrer (Brigadier General) on 1 September 1943, whereupon he also assumed responsibilities of the medical administrative operations of the German Order Police.

Brigfhr. Dr. Hock returned to the Medical Department of the Waffen-SS in Berlin on 10 April 1944. He was then appointed Corps Surgeon to the new XIII. SS Army Corps on 23 August 1944. He transferred to the same position with II. SS Panzer Corps on 15 November 1944 and maintained this post until the end of the war. His postwar fate is unknown to this writer.

Brigadefuehrer Dr. Oskar Hock bore the N.S. Party Number 97,862 and the SS Number 276,822, indicating approximately his date of admission to those organizations (i.e., 1928 and 1936 respectively). His decorations included the following:

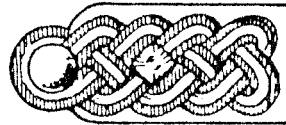
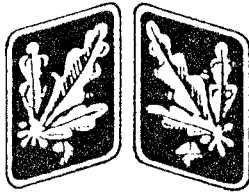
- The Golden Honor Badge of the N.S.D.A.P.
- The WWI Iron Cross, 2nd Class with WWII Clasp
- The WWII Iron Cross, 1st Class
- The Wound Badge in Black
- The War Service Cross, 1st Class without Swords
- The Death's Head Ring of Honor of the SS

CLASSIFIED

WANTED: Waffen-SS sleevebands, awards, documents, etc. up to \$3,000 for complete SS soldier's estates. Paying up to \$200 for SS Soldbuchs. Free, no obligation appraisals. Will travel to view on either side of the Atlantic. All transactions strictly confidential. Write to: Robert Springer, Genco Oil Corp., 725 E. Market St., Wilmington DE 19801. [16]

WAFFEN-SS GRUPPENFUEHRER (LIEUTENANT GENERALS)

A PROFILE



Twenty-three full-time members of the Waffen-SS eventually attained the rank of SS-Gruppenführer (Gruf.). The oldest of the group was Leo von Jena (born in 1876) and the youngest was Dr. Karl Brandt (born in 1904). Nine of the other Gruppenführer were born in the 1890s.

Two SS-Gruf. were from the old Austro-Hungarian Empire: Fritz von Scholz and the Hungarian Josef Grassey. Thirteen of the Gruf. came from parts of Prussia, while five came from Bavaria, and one each came from Hamburg (Streckenbach), Hesse (Schwab), and Mecklinburg (Priess). Karl Brandt was born in Alsace (Elsass), of Prussian ancestry. Only six of the W-SS Gruf. retained their religious affiliations and all of these were Evangelical Lutherans.

Nine of the W-SS Gruf. were graduates of higher military academies, while three others had taken abbreviated courses in said facilities. Only six Gruf. had the benefit of higher university educations. One, Josef Grassey, was a graduate of the Royal Hungarian Honved Military Academy. Thirteen of the 23 Gruf. were professional military officers. Five had left the service in the early 1900s to become businessmen, while two others had become medical doctors. Two of the W-SS Gruf. had been career Army NCOs (Hermann Priess and Max Simon), while seven others had been reserve officers.

Prior to their service in the W-SS, the Gruf. had served in the following armed services: the German Navy, the Royal Austro-Hungarian Army, the Hungarian Honved, the Bavarian Army, the German Army, the Royal Prussian Army and the German Police. The lowest SS membership number, 14,713, belonged to Bruno Streckenbach (CO, 19th Latvian SS Div.), while the highest, 467,434 was held by Karl-Gustav Sauberzweig (CO, 13th Croat SS Div.). Fourteen of the Gruf. had SS numbers above 200,000, while the rest came below that. K.-G. Sauberzweig and Karl von Truenfeld (CO, 10th SS Pz.Div.), were not members of the NSDAP, while Josef Grassey (a Hungarian national) was not a member of either the NSDAP or the SS.

Six of the W-SS Gruf. were awarded the Knight's Cross and all went on to receive higher decorations. Three were to receive the Swords and Oakleaves (Fegelein, Priess and von Scholz), with the other three just being given the Oakleaves (Ostendorf, Simon and Streckenbach). One W-SS Gruf. (von Muelverstedt, CO, 4th SS Police Div.), was killed in action, while two others were mortally wounded (von Scholz, CO, 11th SS Div., and Ostendorf, CO, 17th SS Division). One died in American captivity (von Truenfeld), while two killed themselves in captivity (von Pueckler-Burghaus and K.-G. Sauberzweig).

Four of the W-SS Gruf. were executed; two, both medical doctors (Karl Brandt and Karl Gebhardt) were condemned to death at the Nuremberg Trials. Josef Grassey was extradited to the Yugoslav Reds and executed. While a Honved General he had carried out anti-partisan operations against communist terrorists in a disputed area of southern Hungary which was transferred to Yugoslavia after the war. The scope of the operations had gotten him cashiered from the Hungarian Army in 1944, at the insistence of the Horthy regime, which tried without success to join the "Allied" camp. One W-SS Gruf., Hermann Fegelein, was executed on Hitler's orders for "desertion" during the final stages of the battle for Berlin. §

Hstuf. von Bauer (CO III./SS-Art. Rgt. 22/"MT" Div.?) was reported killed-in-action during the battle of Budapest.

On 1 May 1945 in Oberpframmen, five members of the Waffen-SS (two from the 17th SS Div. "GvB" and three from the Police), were killed in captivity by U.S. soldiers from the 42nd Inf. Div. (the so-called "Rainbow" Division). Troops from this command had earlier murdered some 200 members of the 17th SS Div. near Nuremberg.

Also on 1 May 1945, two 17-year old members of the 38th SS Div. "Nibelungen" were made to dig their own graves before being murdered by GI's at Eggstaett (Rosenheim District).



THE FIRST YEAR OF THE 15TH WAFFEN-GRENADIER DIVISION DER SS (LATVIAN NR. 1) FEBRUARY 1943 TO FEBRUARY 1944

The 15th Latvian SS Division was authorized by the Reichsfuehrer-SS on 26 February 1943 and ordered to commence forming immediately under the guidance of SS-Brigadefuehrer Peter Hansen, the commander-in-chief of the Waffen-SS in the Ostland Reichscommissariat which included the Baltic states and Byelorussia. The personnel for the division came from Latvians serving in other branches of the German armed forces, new volunteers and from conscripts who had been called up for military duty by the provisional Latvian government (the Germans carefully stayed out of this process). In addition, 1,000 partially trained recruits destined for the 2nd Latvian SS Brigade were recalled at the end of March 1943 and reassigned to the 15th SS Division. The division's top command echelon was to be German with Latvian advisors, but other than that nearly all authoritative positions were to be filled by Latvians.

The designated divisional units were formed in different Latvian towns as follows:

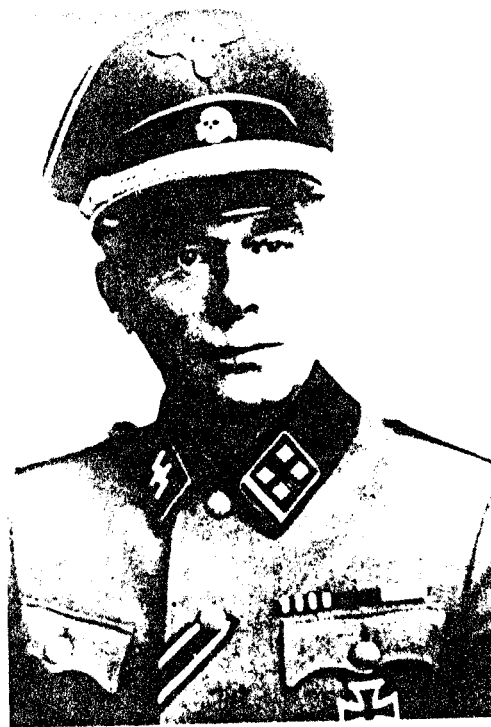
- Divisional Staff in Riga
- SS Grenadier Regiment 32 in Paplaka near Libau (Liepaja)
- SS Grenadier Regiment 33 in Valnode near Prekule (Priekule)
- SS Grenadier Regiment 34 in Wenden (Cesis) and later in Windau (Ventspils)
- SS Artillery Regiment 15 in Mitau (Jelgava)
- SS Fusilier (Rece) Battalion 15 in Windau
- SS Signals Detachment 15 in Tukums
- SS Engineer Battalion 15 in Mitau
- SS Anti-tank Detachment 15 in Groblna near Libau
- SS Flak Detachment 15 in Groblna

At the beginning of May 1943, Brigfhr. Hansen was replaced as the divisional CO by Brigfhr. Graf von Pueckler-Burghaus. His mission was to make the division combat-ready as soon as possible. Ordinarily this would not have been that difficult a task but another factor intervened. The 2nd Latvian SS Brigade, which was already at the front, had begun to take such heavy losses that 70-80% of the trained recruits from 15th SS Division had to be sent to it as replacements. This kept the progress of forming the 15th SS Division in a perpetual hole and meant that it would eventually have to be deployed at the front with large numbers of under-trained men.

By the autumn of 1943 the command roster of 15th Latvian SS Division looked like this:

- Divisional Commander: Brlgfhr. Graf von Pueckler-Burghaus
- SS-Gr.Rgt.32 (Latvian Nr.3): Staf. A. Kripens
- Adjutant: Hstuf. V. Hazners
- Staff Company: Ostuf. Lanka
- I. Battalion: Hstuf. Viksne
- II. Battalion: Hstuf. J. Ozollns
- 13th Infantry Gun Company: Hstuf. Zalais

- 14th Anti-tank Company: Hstuf. Pommers
- SS-Gr.Rgt.33 (Latvian Nr. 4): Staf. V. Janums
- Adjutant: Hstuf. Rullins
- Staff Company: Ostuf. Parups
- I. Battalion: Hstuf. Ameriks
- II. Battalion: Ostubaf. Silins
- 13th Infantry Gun Company: Hstuf. Blums
- 14th Anti-tank Company: Ostuf. Strazdins
- SS-Gr.Rgt.34 (Latvian Nr. 5): Staf. Apsitis (sick December 1943 to January 1944 and replaced by Staf. Silgailis and Staf. Zenins)
- Adjutant: Hstuf. Kilitis
- Staff Company: Ostuf. Rekelis
- I. Battalion: Ostubaf. Druvaskalns
- II. Battalion: Ostubaf. Bebris
- 13th Infantry Gun Company: Ostuf. Brivkalns
- 14th Anti-tank Company: Ostuf. Tervitis
- SS-Art.Rgt.15: Staf. Skaistlauks
- Adjutant: Hstuf. Insbergs
- I. Detachment: Ostubaf. Grikis



Waffen-Ostubaf. Karlis Aperats, CO, WGR 32/15.SS Division. Mortally wounded in action, summer 1944.



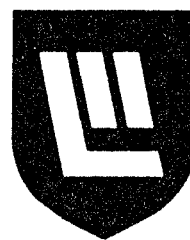
Assorted national armshields.

II. Detachment: Ostubaf, Berzins
 III. Detachment: Ostubaf, Linins
 IV. Detachment: Ostubaf, Sels
 Staff Battery: Hstuf, Svarzbachs
 SS Fusilier Battalion 15 (Reccce): Hstuf, Lapainis
 Adjutant: Ostuf, Makovskis
 1st Company: Hstuf, Prieditis
 2nd Company: Ustuf, Kruka
 3rd Company: Ostuf, Groza
 4th Company: Ostuf, Abolins
 SS Engineer Battalion 15: Hstuf, Klavins
 Adjutant: Ustuf, Vanags
 1st Company: Ostuf, Freimanis
 2nd Company: Ustuf, Reimanis
 3rd Company: Ostuf, Ljabs
 SS Anti-tank Detachment 15: Hstuf, Trezins
 Adjutant: Ostuf, Bite
 1st Company: Hstuf, Lulis
 2nd Company: Ostuf, Sprogis
 Staff Company: Hstuf, Sikaters

At the beginning of November 1943, SS Gr.Rgt.34 was deemed battle-worthy and was sent from Windau to Ostrov where it was attached to the 281st Infantry Division. The 15th SS Divisional Staff followed shortly, relocating first to Novo-Sokolnijiki then establishing its HQ in Ramonje. On 20 November 1943, SS Gr.Rgt.34 moved into the "Barbarossa Positions" near Novo-Sokolnijiki. These constituted a secondary defensive line about 5 km behind the main lines which lay due east of the Dno - Novo-Siolnijiki railroad tracks and were manned by soldiers from the 83rd and 205th Infantry Divisions.



Collar patch of the 15th Latvian SS Division, taken from the Latvian coat of arms.



Identification sign of the 15th Latvian SS Division.

The other 15th SS units began arriving at the front from the first part of December 1943 to early January 1944. Each of the grenadier regiments sent small battle-groups to the foremost front positions to gain experience. They were integrated into the German infantry divisions. A portion of the SS Artillery Rgt. 15 under Stubaf. Rehbergs was subordinated to the Artillery Rgt. 205 under Oberst Schultz. The Latvian SS troops assigned to the frontline positions quickly proved their worth but generally took high losses in the process.

At the end of January 1944 the entire 15th SS Division was ordered into the frontlines on the Redja River about 45 km to the south of Staraja-Russa. The divisional units left for their new destination from Koknja (25 km north-west of Narva) and Belbelka. The SS Gr.Rgt.32 was the first divisional element to leave on 4 February, but the Soviets had already made breakthroughs towards Narva and the regiment had to fight its way through at several points.

The Latvian Division had been assigned to replace the 21st Luftwaffe Feld Division along a 35 km long front sector between Rutschji and Kamenka. This was swamp land with miserable roads and substantial partisan infestations. The right wing of the defensive line could only be held by fortified strongpoints and it was here that a 400-man Soviet force (from 638th Infantry Rgt. and the Ski Bn. of 391st Inf. Division), slipped through during a snowstorm in the night of 14 February. These troops were able to establish themselves undetected in a forest west of Sokolje. During the night of 16/17 February they struck at the positions of the 15th SS Division from the rear.

The Red attack was directed towards Sokolji which was held by 7th Co./SS-Gr.Rgt.33 and the Podorje strongpoint that was defended by 2nd Co./SS-Fus. Battalion 15. Despite a valiant defensive effort Podorje was soon lost. The commander of SS-Gr.Rgt.33 ordered his reserves to retake the lost outpost and by 04:00, after some heavy fighting, they had succeeded. A counterattack by 3rd Co./SS-Fus.Bn.15 to the north of Podorje succeeded in regaining a lost bunker but otherwise bogged down in the face of stiff enemy machine gun fire.

in regaining a lost bunker but otherwise bogged down in the face of stiff enemy machine gun fire.

It took roughly another day and a half of difficult fighting to eliminate the Soviet penetration. By 18:00 on 18 February it was all over and the enemy resistance had ceased. Of the original 400 Red Army troops involved in the action, 300 had been killed and another 30 had been captured (including two officers). The rest got away.

On 17 February a command change took place when Oberfuehrer Nicolas Heilmann arrived to take over the reins of the division from Brigfhr. von Pueckler-Burghaus. On the next day orders came from 16th Army calling for the 15th SS Division to fall back to a new defensive line near Poljiste, about 30-35 km west of their present positions. At the same time the Latvians were supposed to protect the southern flank of German units that were pulling back to the north.

Much of the retreat had to be carried out over the Bebelka-Dedovitschi road, which was also to be used by other units in the area. A battle-group based on SS-Gr.Rgt.33 and 2nd Co./SS-Fus.Bn.15 under the overall command of Staf. Janums, was formed to provide protection for the main body of the division during the fall back. Kampfgruppe "Janums" was to use an improvised route taking it through Ljischitshina-Krasny Njivki, Andronov, Sapoljy, Bol. Goroditscha and Schil Berok. It would have to negotiate subsidiary roads that had long since vanished under high snow drifts. The Kampfgruppe was to keep in touch with divisional HQ via radio communications.

The 15th SS Division's relocation movement began shortly before midnight on 20 February 1944 and despite the difficult terrain conditions and close proximity of the enemy, things went well at first. By the evening of the 21st the main body of the division had reached Aljeksino. The SS-Gr.Rgt.32 brought up the rear and took up readiness positions near Skripljivki. On the 22nd orders came to speed up the retreat. In the course of trying to do this radio contact was lost with the covering KGr. "Janums" and this would cause innumerable difficulties over the days ahead.

To try and rectify this situation, Staf. Janums dispatched a 16-man mounted squad to link up with the division and relay on any further orders. This group made it through all right to divisional HQ, received revised orders and then started back to KGr. "Janums." But on the way it was ambushed by terrorists and seven men of the mounted squad, including the commander, were killed. The others were forced to hide out in the forest and it was not until 26 February that they were able to catch up with the battle-group near Bulgino, which by that time was encircled by the foe.

Worried about the loss of contact with KGr. "Janums," Oberfuehrer Heilmann sent out a 40-man motorized scouting party, accompanied by two 2 cm Flak guns, to try and find it on the morning of 24 February. But once again another disaster ensued. A strong, well-equipped partisan band trapped and eliminated the entire group.

In the meantime, things began to go from bad to worse for the main column. Due to enemy penetrations the initial route was closed off to the division and detours had to be made. The division's motorized elements were switched to the Gorodovika-Soboltitzl road and they had a good chance of making it through before the enemy intervened. Had they been held back by the foot and horse-drawn segments, it is likely that the Soviets could have cut off the entire division.

The route of advance for the 15th SS Division was scouted and prepared daily by members of the SS Engineer



SS-Oberfuehrer Nikolaus Heilmann, commander 15.SS Division from 17 February 1944 to July 1944. Later KIA.

Bn. 15 and an attached Construction Battalion composed of Tatars. They were closely followed by SS-Fusilier Bn. 15 and a Punishment Battalion from 21st Luftwaffe Feld Division led by Major Kalen that had been assigned to the Latvian Division. After that came the horse-drawn supply columns and the bulk of the grenadier and artillery regiments.

On the morning of 22 February, everything but the motorized segments began moving out through the thick forest to the south of the main road and it wasn't very long before things started to go wrong. At 13:30 the rear guard troops came under fire from an enemy advance force at Skriplivki and at the same time the divisional HQ received a report that SS Eng.Bn.15 had gotten stuck in the swamps about 7 km from Pleksino. The whole supply column had also managed to get entangled and hopelessly stalled. Staf. Silgailis, the division's "infantry commander," who was effectively second-in-command of 15th SS Division, tried to straighten out the confusion and get things moving in the right direction.

His task was complicated by the sudden appearance of a Soviet tank force that temporarily severed the rearward connections of SS-Fusilier Bn.15 and the Luftwaffe Punishment Bn. from the rest of the division. The members of those two battalions went into a panic and began to destroy their supplies and heavy weapons and started to return to Pleksino. Fortunately Staf. Silgailis was able to intervene and minimize the damage. The Russian armored vanguard was driven off, calm was restored and the retreat continued.

Oberfuehrer Heilmann had already determined that the only chance for the main body of the division to reach safety was for it to pass through some 30 kms of dense, roadless forest to the main German lines. The march had bogged down earlier in the day but by dusk it started up again. Maps were now useless; a compass was used to plot the route. There were no discernable landmarks since the few villages in the area had been burned down by partisans and their remains were buried under the snow.

In the course of the night, most of the foot elements of 15th SS Division stopped to rest near Gorvschki, but some units decided to keep going, blazing a trail for the others to follow. It was not a smart decision as partisans were soon encountered in force and the Latvians were forced to turn back. The difficult march continued for everyone at daybreak.

After many detours the exhausted forward elements of the division trickled into Gorodovik on 23 February. In the meantime the rearguard was up to its neck in trouble. This consisted of II.Bn./SS-Gr.Rgt.32 and it



Waffen-Ostufaf. Aperats (on the right).



Latvian volunteer on guard duty.

was constantly harassed by the communist terror bands. It fought off partisan forces on 23 February near Seljonij Klijn and again on 25 February near Tschichatshevo. This was a desperate battle with the battalion being outflanked and nearly surrounded. Although nearing the end of their strength the Latvian SS troops held off the enemy all day and were able to disengage under the cover of night-fall. In the Soviet press the "Battle of Tschichatshevo" became a big propaganda victory, with wild reports issued about large quantities of booty captured along with many prisoners. In reality, II./SS-GR 32 lost one machine gun and had two men missing.

The 15th SS Division was still in a real mess on 26 February 1944. The SS-GR 32 along with SS-Fusilier Bn. 15 had just occupied new defensive positions near Kusnjetzova-Sabor when a major enemy attack began at 13:00. It was learned at the same time that a partisan force in the strength of about 1,000 men had cut the division's line of retreat near Krutzi. Oberfhr. Hellmann ordered Major Kalen and his Luftwaffe Punishment Battalion to free this route at all costs. To its credit the battalion was able to do the job, aided by the fact that the original reports of terrorist strengths were over exaggerated and there weren't that many of them to deal with. Major Kalen's success enabled SS-GR 32 to hold on until dusk when further relocation orders were received.

On 27 February, divisional HQ learned that SS-KGr. "Janums," which had been given up for lost, had escaped from an enemy encirclement. But it had been a close call with much hard and costly fighting against partisans and Red Army troops. For a full week the regimental battle-group had been operating entirely behind enemy lines, though this fact was not fully realized until the night of 26/27 February after the Kampfgruppe had reached Buligino and scouting parties found the foe in every direction.

Staf. Janums then knew that the only hope for escape lay in taking immediate action so he ordered his troops to prepare for a breakout. Everything except weapons and ammunition was to be left behind. The wounded would be taken out on horse-drawn Finnish sleds known

as Akjas. In the early morning hours of 27 February the men of SS-KGr. "Janums" successfully broke through the encirclement and by mid-day had reached the German lines at Novorshev.

The battle-group had lost three officers and 53 men killed or missing during the trek. The worst casualties occurred at Glasatshevo on 24 February when terrorists killed 13 of the Latvian soldiers and near Doljose on 25 February when another 31 men were killed in battle with Red Army troops. But all-in-all the Kampfgruppe's mission had been a success. Still Staf. Janums received only the lowly Iron Cross, 2nd Class in acknowledgment of his achievement, while many Germans were decorated with the Knight's Cross for accomplishing essentially the same thing. The survivors of the battle-group were permitted a short rest and then were sent by truck to Veljikaja.

The intention of the German High Command was to combine the 15th Latvian SS Division with the 2nd Latvian SS Brigade under the VI. Latvian SS Corps on the Veljikaja (Velikaya) River Front of 18th Army. This took place effective 2 March 1944 and at about the same time 2nd SS Brigade was in the process of being upgraded into the 19th Latvian SS Division. A short time later both of the Latvian divisions and their regiments were reclassified as "Waffen-Grenadier" units to indicate that they were of non-Germanic origin.

The 19th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (19.WGD) manned the northern part of VI. SS Corps' sector from Golodnyja to Novy Putj. The 15th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (15.WGD) was stationed due south of 19.WGD.

VI. SS ARMY CORPS ON THE VELIKAYA RIVER FRONT

In March 1944, the VI. Latvian SS Corps held down a 25 km front sector along the Velikaya River not far to the east of the Latvian border. The lines ran from the juncture of the Velikaya and Sorota Rivers near Sepentzevo in the north to Voronica (Voronjitscha), which was about 4 km northwest of Puchinskije Gori in the south. The 15.WGD was situated on the Corps' right wing to the south, with 19.WGD on the Corps' left wing to the north. The boundary line dividing the territorial jurisdiction of the twin Latvian SS Divisions ran on a line from Novij Putj to Sapronovo.

This front sector was part of the so-called "Panther Positions," a secondary defensive line that had been created on paper many months before when the German forces were much farther to the east. The "Panther Positions" (roughly paralleling the boundaries of the Baltic States) were to be a last redoubt in case the frontline units needed to retreat. But when that eventuality came to pass in early 1944, very little actual fortification work had been done on the "Panther Positions." Thus these defenses offered very little in the way of permanent protection from the imminent enemy onslaught.

The Soviets first attacked the Latvian Corps' Front on the morning of 1 March 1944, when a 120-man Red Army contingent penetrated the lines of SS-GR 33 (soon to become SS-WGR 33) of the 15th SS Division to the south of Koschina. The invaders began advancing on Kusovicha but a quick counterattack by the regiment put an end to this menace. Eighty of the Red soldiers were killed and four (including two wounded officers) were captured. The rest ran off, leaving behind a 4.5 cm anti-tank gun and four machine guns. This victory cost SS-GR 33 six men killed (including one officer) and another seven men wounded.

Most of the enemy pressure was applied to the left wing of 15.WGD and nearly the entire sector held by 19.WGD. Fighting for Sereckina-Slepny, which now lay in the zone assigned to WGR 32, had first broken out on 4 February and had raged intermittently until 10 March. The village changed hands many times over until finally it was left under Soviet occupation after WGR 32 had absorbed high losses in the futile effort to hold on to it and three supporting German assault guns had been destroyed to boot. The conclusion was that holding on to the place was not worth the expenditure of troops and material to do it!

The key to the positions of 19.WGD on the east bank of the Velikaya was Hill 93.4 near Sapronovo that was held by WGR 43/19.WGD. It soon became a principal enemy objective. On 15 March the Soviets massed large numbers of troops in the woods near the hill, and at 06:40 on the next day they opened up their attack on the position with a heavy artillery barrage. With the cessation of the shelling the Red infantry, supported by a number of tanks, moved inexorably forward. After several of their assaults had been repulsed by the outnumbered Latvians they finally managed to break through and seize both Hill 93.4 and the village of Sapronovo.

Then it was the turn of the Latvians to strike back. Towards noon, I.Bn./WGR 33 spearheaded a counterthrust aimed at retaking Sapronovo. But even though the fighting

went on at a feverous pitch until evening, little progress could be made. The Soviets were just too strong. The III.Bn./WGR 43 attacked Hill 93.4 from the north and succeeded in momentarily regaining its old trenches, but was forced back out of them by an enemy counterattack.

In the early morning hours of 17 March the fighting flared anew, but neither side was able to gain any ground. The Bolsheviks could not break through the Latvians' positions and the Latvians still could not regain the crucial hill. The 18th Army command wanted Hill 93.4 back at all costs and entrusted this assignment to Staf. Silgailis, the "infantry commander" of 15.WGD. He assembled a task force for this purpose consisting of I./WGR 32, SS-Fus.Bn.15 and III./WGR 43. The II./WGR 44 was assigned a supporting role along with the Corps and Divisional artillery. In addition, 18th Army provided assault gun and Stuka dive bomber assistance.

Silgailis planned his attack for the afternoon of 18 March. At 16:00 on that day the first Stuka raid was made on Hill 93.4. A second wave of Stukas hit at 17:00 then at 17:05 a brief artillery bombardment was directed at the hill. Following this the Latvian grenadiers launched their assault, charging back towards their old positions. The weakened and demoralized enemy forces rapidly gave ground and by 17:30 all objectives, including Hill 93.4, had been secured. But the Reds were not through. They counterattacked at 00:30 on the 19th and throughout the night and morning hours fierce fighting raged. Soviet spearheads advanced from both sides of Sapronovo and pierced the Latvian positions but were expelled again by 04:45 and the Latvians held on to the hill. It was a hard-won victory, but worth it. Staf. Silgailis received a personal letter of gratitude from Generaloberst Lindemann, the Commander of 18th Army, for his achievement.

In the meantime, VI. SS Army Corps had suffered severely in another respect. Oberfuehrer Schuldt, the highly competent commander of 19.WGD had been killed while visiting the forward positions of I./WGR 42 on 15 March. Staf. Friedrich Bock was immediately dispatched from the 4th SS Polizei Division to take command of 19.WGD on a temporary basis. He would soon be replaced by a permanent commander, Oberfuehrer (later Gruppenfuehrer) Bruno Streckenbach from the 8th SS Cavalry Division. Streckenbach remained at the helm of 19.WGD to the end, proving himself an exceptional battlefield leader in the process.

The Velikaya front sector remained a "frying pan" throughout the month of March 1944 and daytime movement was nearly impossible. Only during the hours of darkness could supplies be brought forward and the wounded be safely evacuated. Despite all difficulties morale remained high in the Latvian divisions. Both formations were reinforced; the 15.WGD through its replacement battalion in Latvia and the 19.WGD through the 1st Latvian Border Guard Regiment. During the first half of March, 15.WGD also received back some units that had been serving up north around Novo-Sokolnjiki with German divisions. These units were: I.Bn./WGR 33 and the attached 13th Co./WGR 33 along with all of WGR 34. I./WGR 33 had served first with the 207th Inf. Division and then



Top officers of VI. Latvian SS Army Corps in the summer of 1944. From left to right: Staf. Sommer, Corps Chief-of-Staff, Gruf. Bangerskis, Inspector of the Latvian Legion,

Ogruf. Walter Krueger, Corps Commander, and Oberfhr. Silgailis, Chief-of-Staff of the Latvian Legion.

with Kampfgruppe "Schuette" of the 205th Inf. Division from 27 January onward.

On 26 March 1944 a major communist offensive by the 2nd Soviet Baltic Front (1st Assault Army and 22nd Army), got underway in the Velikaya River bend to the southeast of Ostrov with the objective of securing the Ostrov-Opotoschka highway. The focal point of the attack was directed against VI. Latvian SS Corps. A preliminary Russian artillery bombardment got underway at 05:45 with the heaviest shelling directed at the sector held by WGR 34 between the mouth of the Sorota River and Glischino. An hour later the fire was redirected at the Corps' rear area and the ground attack went into motion.

An immediate penetration was made in VI. SS Corps' front in a south-southwesterly direction with the goal of attaining the Schanjino-Novorschev road and cutting off the Latvian forces on the south bank of the Sorota in the Novorschev sector. WGR 33 was forced to immediately pull back its left wing and evacuate its positions along the east bank of the Velikaya south of the Sorota. WGR 32 was then compelled to follow suit with its adjacent right wing. These regiments subsequently fell back to the west.

By 11:00 the enemy infantry had driven to about 300 meters northwest of Selichnovo and had occupied Galitschina Stetschno and the woods south of Glischino. As the senior staff officer in the sector, Waf.-Staf. Silgailis was ordered to muster and utilize all available units in countering the enemy breakthrough effort. He was also given SS-Fusilier Bn. 15 which had been held in reserve. Silgailis intended to coordinate his counterattack from the HQ of WGR 34 which was located on Hill 94.4 near Sterschnjevo, but when he arrived at the command post the enemy suddenly appeared in strength a mere 200 meters away and the whole regimental staff was

pressed into action to repel the foe. Minute by minute the situation grew more desperate. The entire regimental front between Galitschina and Sterchynevo evaporated; only 13th Company (Infantry Artillery) was still holding on and it too was forced to retreat after it had expended its last shell. No more resupply was possible due to the intense enemy artillery fire.

Although losses were stiff, WGR 34 had not suffered as greatly as had originally been thought. It had received a large number of four-week trainees as recent replacements and most of them had given way quickly in the face of the first determined enemy attack. They subsequently began to regroup in the rear area but they were clearly not up to the task of carrying out a major counter-attack. Silgailis was therefore left with only the SS Fusilier Bn. 15 to use. It promptly attacked the enemy advance elements from Lake Stretschno to Tschortovo Gori. At 13:00 a more ambitious assault was carried out by SS-Fus.Bn.15 in conjunction with Grenadier Rgt. 273 and WGR 33 along with tank and artillery support towards Jachnova-Moschina. The effort fell short of regaining the old lines and the Soviets were left with a penetration that was about 3 kms deep and 4 kms wide.

Fortunately it proved possible to smash all further enemy efforts to expand their main breakthrough area, although another penetration was made through the woods to the east of the Ovetschkino-Aluferova road, which had only been lightly occupied by part of WGR 32. A providential reinforcement in the form of III./WGR 32 had just arrived from Latvia and it was used along with some German units in a swift, decisive counterattack that cleared this secondary incursion.

Due to the heavy losses suffered by 15.WGD and its WGR 33 in particular, 18th Army decided to pull it out of the lines in early April 1944 for rest and refitting.

In the night of 5/6 April, WGR 34 relocated to Los, which was 15 km southwest of Schanino, where it was to be reconstructed. The regiment only had a battalion-sized contingent of useable troops left at its disposal, so these men were used to form a new I. Battalion. A new II. Battalion was formed from SS-Fus.Bn.15, which was simply incorporated into the regiment. A fresh batch of recruits from Latvia were used in the formation of the III. Battalion. WGR 34 stayed in Los until 14 April when it was sent to positions near Bardovo.

WGR 32 was the next 15th SS Divisional unit to leave the Velikaya Front and it was sent to Adamkovo. But within a day both of its first two battalions were called upon to help bolster the threatened sector of 19.WGD, so these already tired soldiers had to make a return march of some 50-60 kilometers back to the front. WGR 33 was removed to positions near Bardovo on 16 April after having finished another supreme defensive effort against attacking Soviet forces on 13/14 April. During that time 7th Co./WGR 33 had managed to eliminate an enemy bridgehead across the Sorota north of Voronitscha and in this fighting the Reds lost 70 men killed and 30 captured.

When parts of 15.WGD began to relocate to the rear, 19.WGD was forced to pull back somewhat and extend its lines on its right wing to the south along the west bank of the Velikaya from Telitscheno to Aluferova. The II./WGR 42 which had held Hill 93.4 on the east bank of the river since 18 March, now (early April) fell back to Noviy Putj on the west bank, where it was subordinated to WGR 43. The resulting gap in the front was covered by III./WGR 42 and by II./Luftwaffe Feld Rgt. 41 of the 21st LW Feld Division. At the end of March, the newly formed WGR 44 had arrived to take over the 19.WGD divisional sector to the north of Podbornaya. This had freed the bulk of WGR 42 to join WGR 43 in its sector along the west bank of the Velikaya where a major enemy thrust was anticipated.

In the night of 4 April, two Latvian soldiers who had been captured by the Soviets returned to the 19.WGD. They had been released on purpose to surreptitiously spread pro-Soviet propaganda throughout the ranks of the Latvian SS Divisions. They had no intention of doing so, but they had jumped at this opportunity to escape from communist captivity so had gone along with the charade. The Soviets kept up a steady stream of loud-speaker propaganda in both the Latvian and Russian languages aimed at the VI. Latvian SS Corps in an effort to cause desertions, but their efforts had exactly the opposite effect. No Latvians deserted but their will to resist their hated foe was strengthened!

Still another severe testing for the defenders of the Velikaya Front was forthcoming. The night of 4/5 April 1944 saw extensive Soviet aerial bombardment of the VI. SS Corps' interior artillery positions and the roads and towns in the sector. At 06:00 the communist artillery and mortars opened up on the Latvian SS frontlines on the east bank of the Velikaya. Then at 06:40 the ground attack, with 20 tanks in support, got underway. The key targets were Hill 93.4 and the village of Grigorkina. Terrible close combat erupted as the Latvians held their ground and fought back with utter ferocity. Grenadiers from WGR 42 defied death to knock out 14 of the 20 enemy tanks at close range. For several hours stiff fighting raged but the Soviets had little to show for it except for heavy losses.

A small penetration was made between the positions of II. and III./WGR 42, but all attempts to expand this inroad were crushed by the Latvians. A company from WGR 44 was brought forward at midday to deal with the Soviet breakthrough threat east of Hill 93.4.

At 15:00 the enemy attempted to assemble new offensive forces near Grigorkino, but this development was ef-

fectively disrupted by the VI. SS Corps artillery. The Soviet inroad near Grigorkino was about 600 meters deep by 400 meters wide and at 16:40, following a 10 minute artillery barrage, 6th Co./WGR 42 along with an attached company from WGR 44, counterattacked and in hand-to-hand fighting eliminated the enemy penetration. The day's battlefield activity had cost the Red Army some 400 men killed while WGR 42 reported the loss of 39 soldiers killed and 89 wounded.

In the night of 5/6 April, WGR 42 was reinforced by I./WGR 32, which was deployed near Grigorkino. More enemy efforts at troop assembly were observed in this vicinity and were dealt with by artillery shelling. Other Soviet troops were seen moving to the south and Russian aircraft dropped fire and explosive bombs on the VI. SS Corps' positions.

The enemy offensive shifted to the left wing of 19.WGD on the morning of 7 April. At 10:00 heavy artillery fire was received on both banks of the Velikaya in the sector around Aluferova, Petschance and Saponovo. Following its conclusion the Red infantry attacked with fighter-bomber support. Difficult fighting developed and the town of Aluferova was lost. At 13:30 the communists captured Kirchberg near Petschane but were thrown out an hour later by a Latvian SS counterattack.

On the east bank of the Velikaya only the positions of I./WGR 42 came under pressure, and despite continual infantry assaults and artillery bombardments throughout the day, the battalion's lines held firm. However, 2nd Co./WGR 42 did readjust its positions back about 200 meters at 20:00 under the cover of darkness.

During the fighting on 7 April, 19.WGD suffered a grievous loss when its popular and capable "infantry commander," Waf.-Staf. Voldemars Veiss was badly wounded by shrapnel. He was immediately flown to a military hospital in Riga but died there on 16 April 1944. WGR 43 would later adopt his name as a "battle honor."

The Red Army onslaught continued on 8 April. At 10:00 the Soviets retook Kirchberg only to be flung out again at 16:00. All available segments of WGR 43 were concentrated in this counterattack, which with the help of Stukas, managed to restore the old lines with the exception of a crucial hill near Petschane. The loss of this height threatened the right wing of WGR 42, forcing I./WGR 42 to take up new positions on the east bank of the Velikaya facing Petschane and Novy Putj to the west.

At about 14:00 on 8 April, some small Soviet elements on the east bank launched a surprise attack and penetrated the positions of 3rd Co./WGR 42 on the left wing of I./WGR 42. The 6th Company assisted by 3rd Company, managed to regain the lost ground but a blistering battle raged there all afternoon as both sides attacked and counterattacked and the same pieces of terrain changed hands over and over. But when the shooting died down the Latvians had the upper hand; the Soviet offensive had burned itself out.

For the next several weeks the level of fighting was reduced to local skirmishing and scout troop operations. The exhausted 15.WGD used much of this time to regain its strength while the rest of VI. SS Corps manned the frontlines on the Velikaya. Unbeknownst to everyone, but widely surmised, the Soviets spent this hiatus period gearing up for a monstrous summer assault that would make everything that transpired before look like a holiday in comparison. It would be an attack that would sweep into Latvia itself and eventually end that country's valiant struggle for existence; and it would be an attack made possible only through the massive food and weaponry relief program hand delivered to the communists by the United States!

VI. LATVIAN SS CORPS

SOVIET OFFENSIVE ON THE VELIKAYA RIVER

At 08:00 on 22 June 1944 (the third anniversary of the German invasion of the USSR), the Soviets began their summer offensive against the positions of the VI. Latvian SS Corps on the Velikaya River. The first dangerous development occurred in the sector occupied by the 15th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (Latvian Nr.1). A 500-man strong Russian penal battalion broke through the front held by 9th Co./Waffen-Grenadier Regiment der SS 32 between Utschonoje and Lake Chvoino and advanced to Hill 228.4, which it then proceeded to capture.

Badly outmanned and outgunned, 9th Company had little chance of stopping the foe. All local reserves were thrown into the battle, but to no avail. A counterattack by the entire II.Battalion/WGR 32 was then launched but it also failed when the advance elements got stuck in an enemy minefield. Heavy losses were taken and the battalion commander was killed.

The commander of the 15th SS Division, Oberfuehrer Heilmann, was disturbed by the course of events and he ordered III./WGR 32 along with II./WGR 32 in support to renew the effort to retake Hill 228.4 at dusk. The initial progress under the cover of darkness was good and for the most part the old positions were regained. Then towards midnight a strong Soviet counterattack dislodged the Latvians and drove them back in confusion. In the course of the fighting all of the Latvian SS officers from the two battalions along with 150 NCOs and men were killed or wounded.

In the early morning hours of 23 June, a battalion from the 23rd Infantry Division was assigned to the 15.WGD for the sole purpose of regaining the lost high ground. Perhaps these German soldiers could accomplish what their Latvian counterparts had been unable to do. But it was not to be. The battalion jumping-off positions were severely hit by enemy artillery and the resultant attack failed even more miserably than the previous Latvian ones. The lack of success at regaining the lost terrain brought out strong differences of opinion over what course to follow next between Oberfhr. Heilmann and the CO of WGR 32, Waf.-Staf. Kripens. As a consequence Kripens was relieved of command and replaced by Waf.-Ostufaf. Karlis Aperats.

Due to its high losses suffered on 22 June, WGR 32 was now reinforced by I./WGR 34 under Waf.-Stubaf. Kilitis. This battalion was ordered to prevent any further expansion of the Soviet breakthrough area around Hill 228.4. Likewise, SS Engineer Bn. 15 and 8th Co./WGR 33 (machine guns) and some other small units were also assigned to WGR 32 to further bolster its strength. Against this formidable opposition the enemy could make no further headway so the thrust of the Soviet effort was switched on 26 June from the south of Hill 228.4 to Lake Beloje where III./WGR 32 and some attached elements from WGR 34 were encircled. A swift counterattack by 10th Co./WGR 32 and an 80-man "Special Use" Company formed from parts of WGR 34 and led by Waf.-Ustuf. Lentitis, saved the day and rescued the entrapped units.

To the southwest of Stechnovo, the positions of 1st Co./I.Bn./WGR 32 came under assault by a 100-man Red Army company while the fighting was still in progress

for Hill 228.4. This was a diversionary attack but both sides were equally matched and the men of 1st Company were able to throw back their opponents in hand-to-hand combat. Further enemy efforts in this sector were shattered before they could develop by the Latvian artillery.

The 19th WGD also came under intense enemy pressure on 22 June. The communist objective was to capture Hill 261.1 near Grusdovo from the Latvians. At dawn artillery fire was directed upon the positions of Waffen-Grenadier Regiments 43 and 44 and later on Hills 255.9, 267.0 and 261.1 were also shelled. The Soviet ground attack got underway at 07:00 directed at Hills 261.1 and 255.9 but decisive counterattacks by the two Waffen-Grenadier Regiments drove back the foe and no penetration was made in the divisional front.

Over the next several days developments elsewhere determined the destiny of VI. SS Corps. Soviet armored forces managed to break through the German lines near Polozk and posed a threat to the rear of 16th Army; as a result a general retreat was ordered. For VI. Latvian SS Corps the pullback was to commence on 9 July and be completed during the night of 10/11 July.

On 9 July the VI. Latvian SS Corps supply and support elements began pulling out for the west and this action did not go unnoticed by the Soviets who drew the obvious conclusion that a general withdrawal would soon commence. As a result the Red artillery began going to work on the VI. SS Corps sector, commencing at 10:00 on 10 July. The enemy barrages came in short, lethal bursts, directed to a large extent at the roads being used for the pullback. But another, more sinister development also came to light. The Soviets had managed to sneak a number of well-camouflaged anti-tank guns right into their frontlines and these suddenly opened up with devastating effect on many of the forward Latvian machine gun nests and observation posts. It was an obvious prelude to a full scale attack.

In the course of 10 July, Soviet tank-supported infantry attacks hit the Latvian SS lines at several points, securing a number of breakthroughs. The withdrawal of the support troops on the previous day now came back to haunt the Latvian grenadiers as they found their ammunition stocks rapidly dwindle to little or nothing with no possibility of resupply! This forced an abrupt curtailment of armed resistance in many critical areas which in turn led to a crisis situation of severe proportions. Once they had achieved initial penetration of the VI. SS Corps lines, the Reds quickly began bypassing the main bodies of the Latvian formations with the aim of pocketing them between armored pinchers.

The main Soviet effort against 15.WGD was directed at the right flank of WGR 33, which was situated to the north of Lake Bol.Ostrije. Here enemy tanks had managed to penetrate the regimental lines and had driven to the west of Popovo. This was one arm of a pincher movement directed towards Krasnoje in an effort to cut off the retreat route of the Latvian troops fighting to the south of Lake Bol.Ostrije. It was a critical development that led to several days of desperate combat for the Latvian SS units involved.



The 19.WGD did not come under serious enemy pressure until the afternoon of 10 July when an increasingly strong enemy fire, emanating from the southeast, was received by elements of WGR 44. A serious breakthrough was made in the regimental lines, and the southernmost battalion on the WGR 44 right flank became encircled by Red Army forces. By evening counterattacks by the regiment had rescued the trapped battalion but at a stiff price in casualties and material losses; nearly all of WGR 44's anti-tank guns were lost in the fighting. In the days to come, WGR 44 would be able to successfully carry out its planned withdrawal to the Latvian border which it reached on 20 July, having been reduced in size to a strong battalion. It then came under the command of Waf.-Ostufaf. Kocins.

Other units of 19.WGD also became hard-pressed. During the night of 10/11 July, WGR 43 tried to pull out of its frontline positions but it became fully entangled in a life-or-death struggle with the rapidly pursuing Soviets. As the regiment struggled to disengage the battalion assigned to cover its retreat was encircled and largely destroyed. It was a crippling blow to the regiment. On 11 July, WGR 43 was unable to prevent the Reds from smashing through to reach the main road to Opotschka. This enemy move swiftly endangered the entire Corps' pullback and made it much more difficult than it otherwise would have been. Waf.-Staf. Plesners, the commander of WGR 43, who had the responsibility for protecting the road, was soon dismissed for his failure to do so. He would be joined in short order by both Oberfhr. Heilmann (CO 15.WGD) and Gruf. von Truenfeld (Corps commander) who were also sacked for their shortcomings during this critical period. In addition, 19.WGD, while remaining under the command of Gruf. Streckenbach, would be temporarily subordinated to the overall authority of 93rd German Infantry Division.

Although the Corps' leadership showed signs of faltering at this time, there was little panic among the rank and file troops, who for the most part did their duty without wavering. The two farthest advanced regiments of 15.WGD (WGR 32 and WGR 34) were now ordered to take up new defensive lines behind the Aolja River. The initial pullback

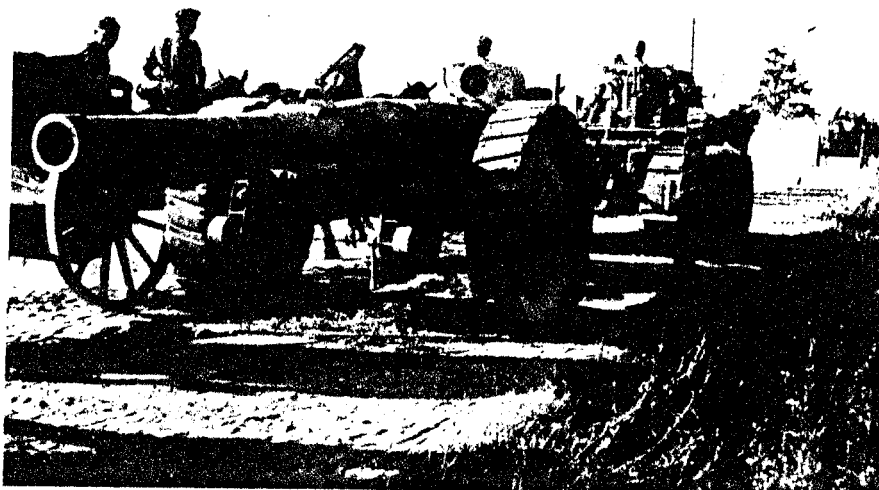
Company commander in WGR 34/15.SS Division demonstrates the Ofenrohr anti-tank weapon to Gruf. Bangerskis (second from left).

was concluded with only minor losses. Then a strong enemy force began making a dangerous thrust towards the new positions from the northeast. The II./WGR 32 counterattacked this element and dealt it severe losses, thus taking some of the pressure off of the division for a short time.

In the 19.WGD sector on 11 July, most of the enemy pressure was applied to the right wing of WGR 42 to the south of Lake Aljo. A Soviet penetration in a depth of 2-3 kilometers was made in the Andro-Cholma area and the lead elements advanced all the way to the divisional artillery positions. Firing at point-blank range, the Latvian gunners drove back the Reds and produced enough smoke to shield the next phase of WGR 42's withdrawal! Other elements of 19.WGD were hard-pressed on this day but in general they stood firm and repelled even the most strenuous enemy efforts. The one significant exception here being the loss of the Opotschka road by units of WGR 43.

In the night of 11/12 July, the Latvian Divisions endeavored to fall back to the "Odenwald" positions, a designated defensive line which ran from the Aolja River through Lake Beresovskoje to Subovo, Schegino and Ljebin-jetza. Due to the rapid pursuit of the Red Army the "Odenwald" line was almost rendered untenable before it could even be fully occupied. A number of enemy penetrations were made through these positions while the VI. SS Corps retreat was still in progress. However, most of these intrusions were sealed off before they became too dangerous.

In the course of the night, the bulk of 15.WGD was able to pass back through the narrow spit of land between the twin lakes near Sanovo. At Vodobeg, just adjacent to the retreat route of the division, lay the spoils from an abandoned rear area Army canteen. This material was just too tempting for many of the Latvian soldiers to pass up. For the most part they had been without



many basic amenities for many months while in the front-lines, so the discovery of the canteen cache was extremely enticing. Unfortunately it proved to be a fatal attraction for all too many of the Latvians. Most of those who paused to loot the supply stocks later wound up in Soviet hands.

The 15.WGD in particular was now in the grip of rapidly declining morale at all levels. The disintegration of what was supposed to be an orderly withdrawal into a danger-packed helter-skelter dash to the west was at the core of the problem. And this in turn could be blamed on the intense, continuous enemy pressure. But the deteriorating situation was further aided and abetted by some of the top brass in the division, who had also succumbed to the pressure.

An incident in the village of Filjevo on the south end of Lake Kamennoje brought the remaining morale in the 15.WGD plummeting to its nadir. On 12 July, the harried and harassed divisional commander, Oberfuehrer

Heavy artillery from SS-Art.Rgt.15/15.SS Division on the march; much of the weaponry consisted of captured Soviet field pieces.

Heilmann arrived in the village only to find a number of men from his command milling around without weapons and seemingly without purpose. These were basically just stragglers and combat fatigue cases who no longer knew what to do, but at the sight of them the exhausted Heilmann blew his stack. He ordered a number of them to be shot as "deserters" as an example to the rest. The executions were carried out but the incident had exactly the opposite effect of what was intended. The Latvian resentment towards the German command element was immediate and the trust and confidence that had been placed with the Germans began to unravel. This erosion was halted by Heilmann's Waffen-SS superiors in Berlin

who were also extremely displeased by his actions. As a direct result of this shooting incident, Heilmann was removed from command a few days later and replaced by Oberfuehrer von Obwurzer. Oberfuehrer Heilmann, however, did receive the Knight's Cross for the performance of the 15.WGD while under his command. He was later posted to the 28th SS Division "Wallonien" and was listed as missing-in-action in Pomerania on 5 January 1945.

The critical point in the fighting on 11 July had been at Duchново, where a gap in the front existed between the two Latvian SS Divisions. The unit charged with defending Duchново was II. Detachment/SS Artillery Regiment 19. It successfully fought off an enemy tank attack but eventually had to withdraw due to ammunition shortages and severe losses. The detachment had six of its field pieces destroyed and around 100 transport horses killed in the fighting. The nearby IV./SS Artillery Rgt. 15, which was attached to SS AR 19 during the withdrawal, was also badly shot up on this day and sustained serious casualties.

The "Odenwald" positions were rendered largely useless on 12 July and the Latvian SS Divisions evacuated them to take up a new defensive line running from Uljachново (20 km south of Opotschka) to Svonі (12 km southeast of Opotschka) to Lapteva (10 km northeast of Opotschka). After fighting here throughout most of 12 and 13 July, the Latvian grenadiers were ordered to cross back to the west bank of the Velikaya River.

This was not an easy task, since there were only two bridges still intact over the river; one at Opotschka and another near Kosogori, and the latter bridge soon had to be destroyed due to the advance of a Soviet armored force from the west, which had already crossed the Velikaya to the south of Kosogori. From the 15.WGD, only I./WGR 32 had managed to cross the Kosogori bridge before it was blown. Isolated from the remainder of the division, this battalion under Waf.-Stubaf. Haznars began heading north with Soviet armor in hard pursuit. The battalion was also accompanied by Waf.-Ostufaf. Aperats, CO of WGR 32, who had crossed the river with it, inadvertently leaving the rest of his regiment behind. Haznars and Aperats now devoted themselves to finding another crossing for the Latvian SS troops still on the east bank of the river.

A ford was found near Schigareva and I./WGR 32 was deployed to meet the threat of the enemy tanks advancing from the south. The battalion was able to hold off the foe while the rest of 15.WGD crossed to the west bank of the Velikaya commencing at 16:00 on 14 July. Due to high water the infantry artillery had to be left behind but all of the personnel got through. A new defensive line due south of Opotschka was immediately adopted.

The WGR 32 manned 15.WGD's right wing near Fronjina (about 10 km southwest of Opotschka), while WGR 33 was in the center of the new divisional lines near Matjuscha and WGR 34 was on the left wing of the division at Irski. The 19.WGD, which had crossed the Velikaya with little difficulty at Opotschka, was situated to the north of 15.WGD, with a defensive alignment running from Opotschka to Kramije. It proved possible for the Latvians to hold off the communist onslaught throughout the remainder of 14 July, but on the morning of 15 July the Reds were able to punch several holes in the Corps' lines.

Once again threatened by encirclement, 15.WGD next withdrew towards Prokovskoje while 19.WGD retreated in the direction of Krasnije. The 15.WGD soon found itself again in deep trouble. The terrain it had to cover was marshy and the roads were poor. In addition, "partisan" bands abounded and they had destroyed many of the



Latvian Flak gunner.

bridges over the streams and ravines that intersected the divisional march route. The terrorists also set up booby-traps and ambushes for stragglers and isolated elements, and they were able to disrupt the division's movements.

Now all of the threads that held the division together began to unravel. Oberfhr. Heilmann ordered Waf.-Staf. Janums to relocate the units of his WGR 33 and WGR 32 to Pokrovo in advance of the rest of the division. While making a reconnaissance near Pokrovo Janums ran into an enemy spearhead and was badly wounded in a firefight. His command was temporarily cut off from the rest of 15.WGD so he could not be evacuated for medical treatment until 17 July.

A number of the divisional units that were ordered towards Pokrovo never got there; the Soviets got in their way in considerable force and these elements soon found themselves cut off from both the WGR 33 vanguard and the 15.WGD as well. The commander of a neighboring German Army task force, Oberst Jahnke, combined the assorted Latvian units with some German ones, and formed a battle-group, the command of which he assigned to the senior 33 Latvian SS officer, Waf.-Ostufaf. Aperats (the CO of WGR 32). Aperats' battle-group was to continue to retreat to the Latvian border in loose conjunction with its German neighbors, but as fate would have it, it would very quickly find itself isolated and on its own.

SS-Kampfgruppe "Aperats" initially consisted of the following elements and troop strengths:

WGR 32 (less II.Bn.): 350 men

II./WGR 33 and 14.(Anti-tank)Co./WGR 33: 150 men

Ist Co./SS Engineer Bn, 15: 100 men

A makeshift German battalion comprised of remnants of I./Grenadier Rgt. 159 and IV./GR 159 both from the 69th Infantry Division: 250 men

Total troop strength: 850 men



SS-Oberführer Herbert von Obwurzer, commander 15.SS Division from 21 July 1944 to 26 January 1945. Apparently committed suicide to avoid Soviet capture.

Heavy weapons: Two anti-tank guns with five shells each!

Kampfgruppe "Aperats" began its journey towards Latvia on 15 July and was savagely assaulted by two "partisan" battalions, which had a strength of about 400 men in total. The terrorists were eventually routed in a hard battle, but it took the small task force until evening to regroup and reorganize to continue its march and by then all contact had been lost with other friendly elements. Waf.-Ostufaf. Aperats now found himself in unfamiliar territory with no map to guide him, so the withdrawal had to continue under the guidance of a compass in a southwesterly direction.

As can be imagined, this sort of rambling journey in an area which was being rapidly overrun by huge enemy forces, invited disaster. At midnight on the 15th, KGr. "Aperats" reached the village of Lipitzl, which meant that it had taken a wrong turn somewhere and was clearly on the wrong course. The Veetjia River was blocking the way and no bridges could be found to cross it, so a ford had to be found. Near the village of Askenova, Aperats decided to make a crossing, even though the river was still high and wide at this point. The troops swam across for the most part, with the supplies and non-swimmers being passed over or floated across in groups. The battle-group's former advance element guarded the river crossing and then assumed rearguard duties. At 02:00 a sharp exchange of fire could be heard between German and Soviet troops even further to the east but by 03:00 the fording of the Veetjia had been successfully completed and the march of KGr. "Aperats" continued on through Baltino to Maschuri.

At 09:00 the Isa River was reached near Koshentzi and crossed without incident. At about 13:00 the battle-group came under infantry fire near the village of Peski and Waf.-Ostufaf. Aperats sent his lead element from WGR 32 forward to deal with this threat. A violent battle with a full-sized Red Army battalion developed. When it had ended, 150 Soviet dead were counted on the battlefield while the Latvians lost 15 men of their own killed and had another 20 to 25 wounded. The enemy survivors had largely fled the scene and they left behind all of their supplies and heavy weapons, including an intact

"Stalin Organ" rocket mortar, several anti-tank guns and a number of machine guns and regular mortars. A vehicle park with a number of horses and intact trucks was also captured. Some prisoners indicated that the crushed battalion had been formed from the students of a Soviet close-combat training school.

Some of the trucks were given a quick overhaul and then were appropriated for the use of the battle-group, but the other booty had to be left behind. A short time after the battle near Peski, KGr. "Aperats" reached the town of Mosulji and began to receive long-range enemy heavy weapons fire. Nonetheless the soldiers were able to cross the Silupe River near this point and build-up a bridgehead perimeter on the other side. Thirty enemy tanks suddenly appeared and bore down swiftly on the bridgehead. The Latvians were now back in their homeland but the Soviets had beaten them to it!

Now began a life-and-death struggle that would rage without pause for the next five hours. A squad of tank destroyers immediately went into action with their Panzerfausts, but after they had knocked out eight of the enemy tanks the remaining ones finished them off. At the same time the rest of the battle-group was attacked from the rear and became fully embroiled in a hopeless engagement between two powerful Red Army pinchers.

It was a bloody, savage fight with no way out. The Latvian SS troops and their German comrades were trapped and had to slug it out to the finish. Waf.-Ostufaf. Aperats was badly wounded and shot himself rather than fall into the hands of the communists. Three-hundred twenty-eight members of the battle-group were killed in action, including six German and 22 Latvian officers. Another 300 soldiers were wounded and captured by the Reds. The few survivors slipped away as best they could, pursued by the enemy armored vehicles which prowled the south bank of the river, trying to run down and kill anyone who had escaped the main carnage.

Miraculously around 100 members of the battle-group did escape with their lives. They made their way into a thick forest near Peski where they were able to regroup at about 20:00 hours. The CC of I./WGR 32, Waf.-Stufaf. Haznars, and four other officers (all of whom were wounded), were among the survivors. Haznars took charge of the battle-group remnants and reorganized them into three small groups, each of which was to try and recross the Silupe and find a way through the enemy positions on their own. At midnight on 16 July the final escape effort got underway but it proved to be only a partially successful endeavor. Only Waf.-Stufaf. Haznars group was able to make its way through the swamp on the east bank of the Silupe (it should be noted that the original KGr. "Aperats" bridgehead had been established in a bend in the river, so its banks lay in all directions in a very constricted area). The other two squads floundered around, ran into the enemy and broke apart.

Haznars and ten men next reached the west bank of the river where they were gradually joined by perhaps 30 others from the other two dispersed groups. They spent the entire day of 17 July hiding in the marshland, then during the night they again waded across the winding, four-foot deep river at another point, in an effort to find a route to safety. Daylight hours now had to be spent in concealment, with the only real movement being carried out under the cover of darkness. At 02:00 on 19 July, Gruppe "Hoznars" ran into some Soviet troops and lost some more men in the brief clash that followed.

After losing even more men, Haznars decided to once again split his command up into smaller parties with the objective of meeting up later at a designated assembly point during the night of 19/20 July. Only five men -

all wounded - were able to make that appointment! The survivors from KGr. "Aperats" finally reached the friendly lines of Fusilier Bn. 93 (from 93rd Infantry Div.) on 20 July. When the last of them had trickled in the final tally stood at four officers, three NCOs and five men, or 12 altogether out of 850!

Waf.-Stubaf. Haznars was one of the lucky few to get through and his exploits and those of his men were recorded in the Roll of Honor of the German Army. Haznars subsequently received the prestigious Honor Roll Clasp. Waf.Ostufaf. Aperats was posthumously awarded the Knight's Cross and promoted to Standartenfuehrer. The new commander of 15.WGD, Oberfhr. von Obwurzer sought to have a sleeve title bearing Aperats' name issued to the men of WGR 32, but the higher authorities never gave their approval.

It was determined that Kampfgruppe "Aperats" had more or less blundered right into the back of an entire Red Army Corps, so its chances of survival were virtually nil from the onset. But the battle-group was credited for slowing the Soviet advance for one entire day, during which the main offensive forces concerned were diverted to run down and deal with the pesky Latvians and their German allies.

While KGr. "Aperats" was engaged in its own ordeal for survival, the other regiments of 15.WGD had their own problems. WGR 33 under Waf.-Staf. Janums and WGR 34 under Waf.-Staf. Zenins were encircled and trapped near Karsava. With the help of units of 19.WGD (primarily WGD 42 under Waf.-Ostufaf. Galdins), a break-out was secured but not before devastating losses had been taken. By 19 July the infantry regiments of 15.WGD could only muster around 100 to 200 men each. The division in effect no longer existed and its remnants were realigned into a regimental sized battle-group led by Waf.-Staf. Janums which was subordinated to the 19.WGD.

Following several more days of costly fighting in eastern Latvia, the 15.WGD Kampfgruppe was withdrawn from the front to serve as the nucleus of a rebuilt division. Only the SS Artillery Rgt. 15, which was intact to an extent, remained behind to fight in support of some German units. The 19.WGD, which had suffered substantial losses during the pull-back from the Velikaya but not nearly as many as its sister Latvian SS division, stayed in action although it was reorganized into the following three battle-groups:

1.Kampfgruppe "Waf.-Stubaf. Galdins"

Containing:

- WGR 42 staff and staff company
- six infantry companies
- one light field artillery company
- one heavy weapons company

2.Kampfgruppe "Waf.Stubaf. Stipnieks"

Containing:

- WGR 43 staff and staff company
- four infantry companies
- one heavy weapons company

3.Kampfgruppe "Waf.Ostufaf. Kocins"

Containing:

- WGR 44 staff and staff company
- four infantry companies
- one heavy weapons company

The heavy weapons companies assigned to the battle-groups each consisted of one anti-tank gun platoon, one light mortar platoon and one heavy mortar platoon.

The 19.WGD was now redesignated SS-Kampfgruppe "Streckenbach" after its commander and in addition to the above three battlegroups also included the SS Artillery Rgt. 19, which had been quickly reformed using as its base two of its own surviving light artillery detachments along with one light and one heavy artillery detach-



Members of the Latvian SS Grenadier Training and Replacement Rgt. 15 at Riga-Bolderaa in the summer of 1944.

ment from SS AR 15. The following divisional units also remained at the disposal of SS-KGr. "Streckenbach":

SS-Feldersatz Bn. 19 (consisting of three infantry companies and one anti-tank company)

SS-Signals Det. 19

SS-Anti-tank Det. 19

SS-Flak Det. 19 (with one heavy battery, one medium battery and one light battery).

SS-Engineer Bn. 15 (SS Engineer Bn. 19 was still in training in Bohemia-Moravia, but would join 19.WGD in August 1944).

Although little more than battalions in strength, the three infantry battle-groups from 19.WGD would more or less continue to function as and be referred to as regiments, a practice that will be continued in this text.

At the same time 19.WGD was being streamlined for continuing combat operations (late July 1944), the VI. SS Corps commander, SS-Gruppenfuehrer von Treuenfeld was removed from that position and replaced by the highly competent Gruf. Walter Krueger, fresh from a successful command stint with the 2nd SS Pz.Div. "Das Reich." The 15.WGD now underwent a hiatus of sorts; much of its manpower and most of its equipment were transferred to 19.WGD and the remaining soldiers were reorganized into a temporary construction regiment to work on river bank fortifications in Latvia. Leftover weaponry was sent all the way to Italy to equip other Waffen-SS units there. Fortunately, the decision was made to begin the rebuilding of 15.WGD and during the latter half of August 1944 its survivors were dispatched to West Prussia to serve as the nucleus for the "new" version of the division, which would never again return to Latvia.

Back in Latvia the grenadiers of 19.WGD spent the rest of the summer of 1944 engaged in strenuous and violent battles in the defense of their homeland beginning with the defense of the eastern Latvian province of Livland.

19TH WAFEN-GRENADIER DIVISION DER SS (LATVIAN NR. 2/SS-KGR. "STRECKENBACH") AND THE DEFENSE OF EASTERN LATVIA JULY-OCTOBER 1944

When 19.WGD was reorganized into battle-group form for the defense of Livland Province in eastern Latvia, a call went out for volunteers to help form an assault gun escort company. It was originally planned to make 3rd Co./SS Anti-tank Det. 19 a self-propelled gun (motorized artillery) company, but equipment shortages negated this scheme. But the division was able to draw upon the neighboring Assault Gun Detachment 393 led by Hauptmann Barths for support during most of the rest of its history and it was to this unit that the Latvian assault gun escort company was assigned. Consisting of some 60 volunteers between the ages of 19 and 23, the duty of the company was to prevent enemy infantry from getting in too close to the vulnerable assault guns. The detachment was easily recognized by the rhino head ID sign that its vehicles carried.

Due to a number of communications failures that plagued other foreign volunteer units, the signals detachment assigned to 19.WGD was almost purely German in composition. It consisted of one radio company and one field telephone company along with a Latvian platoon, whose job was to convey vital information to the internal divisional units. In the course of the summer the Flak detachments from both 15.WGD and 19.WGD were combined to form Corps Flak Detachment 106/506. The 19.WGD also put together a band with its director and most of its musicians coming from the City Theatre Orchestra in Riga. A contingent of musicians from the 7th SS Mountain Div. "Prinz Eugen" was mixed in to provide some diversity. The band director personally composed "The March of the 19th SS Division," which was presented for the first time when the bandmen reported to Gruf. Streckenbach on the occasion of the band's official incorporation into the division. For the most part the band devoted itself to playing military music, both traditional and modern, with a goodly repertoire of traditional Austrian marches thrown in, which was possibly due to the "Prinz Eugen" influence.

At the end of July 1944, 19.WGD assumed defensive positions along a line running from Aisharkles to the west bank of Lake Lubana and from there to Swidseena, Purnalji, Leelpurwi, Cerpeji, Licagals and Rosneki. Just as the Latvian soldiers began constructing their fortifications, heavy fighting broke out near Varaklanji. But the Soviets could not gain any ground here so they switched their main efforts farther to the north.

WGR 44 noted increasing enemy activity on 29 and 30 July to the east of Saleneeki and in the marshy woodlands by the Lisina River to the south and east of Ikaunieki. Therefore, the regimental CO, Waf.-Ostuf. Kocins decided to prepare a surprise attack to disrupt the Soviet intentions. On the morning of 31 July the operation went into effect when two companies from WGR 44 assaulted

the enemy troop concentration, catching it completely off balance. In a short and rapid fire-fight the 251st Rifle Rgt. of the 85th Red Army Division was totally destroyed to the east of Ikaunieki. It was a bravura performance for the outnumbered Latvians who also captured 40 prisoners and large quantities of war material.

In the evening of the previous day the Soviets had penetrated the 19.WGD lines to the north of Lake Lubana but a swift counterattack by 4th Co./WGR 42 had restored the situation. A number of further enemy attacks were repulsed by this company on the 31st, but a Red breakthrough at another point in the lines near Rosneeki endangered the company's open flank and forced it to withdraw under the protective covering of a nearby forest.

On 1 August, 19.WGD in roughly brigade strength, had to extend its defensive line southwards to Barkava which increased the length of its front to nearly 40 km, far more ground than a full-strength division could be expected to hold. As a result, much of the line could only be held by strongpoints at strategic locations. The extension of the lines meant that the last divisional reserve of any consequence, the SS Field Replacement Battalion 19 (or SS Feldersatz Btl. 19 [SS-FEB 19 for short]), now had to be moved into the front sector between WGR 43 and WGR 44. But it was clear that such a weakly held front could not long hold together under any substantial enemy pressure, and there was plenty of that on the way!

August 2, 1944 saw renewed, intensive fighting all along the Latvian front and the town of Varakljani was captured by the Reds. On the next day they threatened to overrun Barkava until a counterattack by WGR 44 stabilized the situation. This bought time for several German Army units to come up and launch a major attack of their own which succeeded in throwing back the enemy. The staff and staff battery from SS-AR 15 provided substantial support for this undertaking. Also on 3 August, communist forces broke through at Aiskahkles and occupied Hill 99.0 while simultaneously penetrating the positions of WGR 42 near Licagals. The Latvian SS troops counter-attacked here without notable success.

The next day was marked by still more savage fighting. A large-scale Soviet assault wave, backed up by solid artillery support, smashed into and through the right wing of 19.WGD. The Latvian artillerymen could not get enough ammunition for their guns to counter the enemy effort and the isolated outposts that guarded the lines were not able to hold out on their own. The result was that WGR 44 and SS-FEB 19 both had to fall back to Melrani. After a supreme effort the enemy onslaught was finally brought to a halt along a line which ran from Sturmescheeki to Pakulnaki. But the overall situation did not look good.

It was apparent that the Lake Lubana front could not hold out much longer so 19.WGD was ordered to withdraw to the west bank of the Aiweekste River during the night of 4/5 August. By the morning of 5 August the retreat had been completed without much difficulty. But the Reds followed up swiftly and broke through to the Aiweekste River in German Army held sectors at Schwani and Leepukalni, where crossings were immediately begun. The 19.WGD became engaged near Meirani where an enemy advance force was shattered as it attempted a pursuit of the withdrawing units. Also near Meirani, Latvian SS troopers used Panzerfausts to shoot up enemy war material that was being floated across the river.

After several fruitless attempts the Soviets managed to get across the Aiweekste to the south of Meirani with tanks and heavy equipment, and quickly began to threaten all of the west bank defensive positions in the vicinity of Lubana. The 19.WGD had no reserves to deal with this development which directly affected its right (south) flank regiment, WGR 44. However, Waf.-Ostufaf. Kocins organized a small task force from the WGR 44 staff company and the regimental supply troops and this element was able to slow the enemy down in the thick forest that lay opposite Meirani.

Elsewhere on 5 August, the 19.WGD left (north) flank threatened to collapse near Dambischi, about 3½ km to the north of Lubana. A powerful enemy force had gotten in behind the lines here and was attempting to cut the Lubana-Zeswaine supply road. There were two Latvian artillery detachments in the area (I./SS-AR 19 and I./SS-AR 15) but little else and the gunners had to be pressed into action as infantrymen. They were able to bring the enemy advance to a halt but were not strong enough to hold out for long so Gruf. Streckenbach ordered WGR 43 to come to their assistance.

The bulk of WGR 43 reached Dambischi at 02:00 on 6 August and immediately began to prepare for a counter-attack. The old regimental lines had to be assumed by the already hard-pressed WGR 44. WGR 43 opened up its offensive effort at 05:00 with the help of a neighboring German battalion. The attack totally surprised the Soviets and proved to be a complete success. By the time the fighting ended around noon, the enemy incursion had been obliterated and two rifle regiments belonging to two different Red Army divisions had been wiped out.

In spite of the setbacks that had been handed to them the Reds were far from finished with the Latvians and the enemy pressure on WGR 44 intensified. The Soviets had begun to advance from the Madona area towards Zeswaine with the objective of cutting off the defensive forces to the west of Lake Lubana. WGR 44 had shifted now to an east-west axis facing southwards and the small emergency battle-group formed from the regimental staff was still protecting the regimental left wing (east), but the regimental right wing to the west was entirely vulnerable. If it collapsed, Zeswaine would be lost and the entire 19.WGD would be isolated. Because of this crucial situation, WGR 43 had to be relocated to provide back-up for WGR 44.

The only problem with this scheme was that WGR 43 was thoroughly enmeshed in fighting off strong communist assaults in the vicinity of Zepwites. However, at 14:00 on 5 August, the regiment was able to disengage for relocation. By the evening of 6 August, 2nd and 4th Companies/WGR 43 had reached Daljgji and immediately took up defensive positions near Poteri and Krustinjahres. The rest of the regiment arrived on the next day. The enemy remained quiet in this sector, but WGR 44, with the help of III./SS-AR 15, had flung back communist attacks on Sarinji and Osolkani. The III./SS-AR 15 had



Identification sign of the 19th Latvian SS Division.

particularly distinguished itself by shooting up an enemy munitions transport column on a temporary bridge near Bilsinji.

In the night of 6/7 August, VI. SS Corps ordered 19.WGD to disengage and fall back to Zeswaine, in preparation for taking up a new defensive line that ran through Dalgi, Sileneeki, Ataugas, and Dravneeki to a road fork about 3 km from Leedeskrogs. There was only one road open for the retreat, the one running from Lubana to Zeswaine and for the Latvian troops in the Meirani sector there was the additional problem of crossing the Olga Swamp and the winding Aiweekste before the road could even be reached. Thus, while WGR 44 was able to get away from the enemy at 23:00 on 6 August, it was not until 14:00 on the 7th that it was able to reach its new positions.

WGR 43 had more trouble in relocating since the Reds had begun to attack its positions from the south and southwest during the evening of 6 August. The 2nd Co./WGR 43 was particularly hard hit near Poteri, but by the early morning hours of the 7th, the enemy had largely been booted out of the area. However, at 08:00 the Reds were back in battalion strength. With the help of some Flak gunners the company was again able to repel the foe. Then at 11:00 another strong enemy force assaulted 4th Co./WGR 43 near Krustinjahre. The whole regiment became embroiled in the fighting when a Red Army element broke through its left wing near Kalnabulati. Waf.-Stufaf. Stiepniks then undertook a relief attack in the Lejasbulati sector with two of his companies.

Commanding the assault troop that led this attack was Waf.-Ustuf. Zanis Butkus, who had earlier distinguished himself in daring behind-the-lines operations against partisan terrorists and Red Army elements. Butkus and his men managed to completely surprise the Soviets and overrun their positions at Lejasbulati, capturing their bunkers intact. Fifty Red Army soldiers were killed in the action and large quantities of armaments, including 12 field pieces were captured intact. The Latvians lost one man killed and two lightly wounded in the undertaking. The captured weaponry was immediately put into service by the Latvians and realigned for the defense of Lejasbulati, but in a short time the area became threatened by enemy encirclement so the Latvian SS troops couldn't stay there too long. Since there was no way to pull the captured heavy weapons through the swamps to Daljgji, they had to be destroyed. But Zanis Butkus' decisive, dare-devil victory would bring him the award of the Knight's Cross and promotion to Waffen-Obersturmfuehrer. For the last several years, Butkus, an American resident, has been constantly harassed by U.S. secret police from the "Justice" Department, seeking his deportation as a "war criminal." So far their nefarious efforts have met with no success.

Because of the crisis situation in the WGR 43 sector, Gruf. Streckenbach ordered WGR 44 to pull back to new

positions near Ataugas in the vicinity of Aiskujas and Silenezki during the night of 6/7 August and prepare for a counterattack aimed at regaining Peegahses, Lejeeschi, Ahbolkauls and Sihnanjl. WGR 44's attack got underway at 02:00 on the morning of 8 August. Two hours later, after some heavy fighting, Peegahses, Lejeeschi and Ahbolkauls were recaptured. But that's as far as it went. Due to limited artillery support the grenadiers of WGR 44 were unable to proceed any further.

A Soviet counter thrust near Peetneeki soon threatened the regiment's right wing, which was protected by 1st Company. A bit later in the day this company was reinforced by two platoons from 4./WGR 43 and this small task force was able to hold off powerful enemy attacks until the afternoon of the 8th when it received orders to retreat.

In the meantime an enemy company slipped through the 19.WGD lines near Meschmale and attacked the regimental hospital belonging to WGR 42. The regimental surgeon mustered every man he could find that was even partially fit and led them in a desperate defensive effort that managed to save the day and repel the foe.

On the morning of 8 August, Waf.-Stubaf. Stipnieks felt that the enemy threat to the unprotected flanks of WGR 43 was too great to risk so he ordered a pull back of the regiment on his own initiative to the Madona-Gulbane railroad line. Somewhat later on the divisional HQ gave its approval to this move. The hard-pressed WGR 44 was next to move; attempting to occupy positions between Rudsischi and Stat, while WGR 42 took up a new line that ran from Snuzeni to Rudsischi. The interrogation of POWs revealed a startling fact that had only been guessed at: 19.WGD with an operational strength amounting to only about four full battalions, had held off two enemy infantry divisions for three days and had at least delayed the fall of the key town of Zeswaine.

It was an admirable achievement, but the division had once again paid the price in casualties. Replacements were available but it took time to muster, train and equip them. For the moment then the intention of the Corps' command was to withdraw the battered WGR 44 to a peaceful sector for replenishment, while WGR 43 attempted to reform in the frontlines. Unfortunately the Soviets never felt obligated to cooperate; they had unlimited replacements at their disposal along with a limitless supply line to the U.S.A., which made sure that their Bolshevik allies never suffered from the lack of basic necessities!

On the morning of 9 August 1944, while the 19.WGD staff was hoping for something of a breather, substantial enemy forces began assailing the new divisional positions. Despite furious fighting no breakthroughs were made on this day, but the communist assault resumed on the 10th following a blistering artillery bombardment. WGR 43 was on the receiving end of a Soviet tank supported attack, but was able to repel it at about 13:00. A neighboring German unit was not so lucky; the Reds achieved a major breakthrough in its sector which in turn threatened the survival of WGR 43. Panic almost set in among the Latvian grenadiers, but Waf.-Stubaf. Stipnieks managed to restore calm and keep his soldiers on track. After a see-saw struggle for the Zeswaine railroad station, which changed hands several times over in close combat, the Latvians were able to bring the Soviet advance to a halt.

By 11 August the fighting had dwindled off to minor skirmishing and 19.WGD found itself occupying a line that stretched from Nesaule Hill to Jaunweiders, Kaunani, Mureni, Kurpnieki, Saulites, Zeplichi and Zeswaine Station, with other elements in place along the Madona-

Gulbane railroad line. It was apparent that the Soviets had shot their bolt for the time being and for the next several days the front was fairly quiet. This break was used by VI. SS Corps to bring up replacements and SS FEB 19 was finally sent back behind the lines to Jaun-Peebalga to get on with its intended function of training recruits. A large influx of new Latvian volunteers and conscripts (the Latvian authorities and not the Germans conducted a "draft" of military age men), were now being processed by the Latvian SS Field Recruit Depot in Sossenai, which was run by Waf.-Staf. Lobe, a former regimental commander in the 2nd Latvian SS Brigade.

After being brought up to full strength (two infantry battalions, staff, and regimental troops), WGR 44 replaced WGR 42 in the frontlines during the night of 14/15 August 1944. Fighting erupted again in the pre-dawn hour of 20 August when the Russians attacked the positions of WGR 43 between Kaumeni and Jaunweideres. After several hours of stalemated combat, an enemy penetration was made in the sector of 1st Co./WGR 42. A 100-man Latvian contingent culled from various units was able to contain this breakthrough but could not eliminate it. The next day again saw heavy fighting and more cracks appeared in the divisional front. WGR 43 could not stop the onrushing foe and gave ground to the north. WGR 44, under intense pressure, had to pull back its right wing. The situation was finally stabilized by the accurate combined fire of the divisional Flak and anti-tank units, but both sides had again taken high losses.

By the evening of 21 August, 19.WGD had absorbed Porinje, Pakuli, Valgi and Kauneni into its lines, while still retaining a portion of the old defensive line. Once again the division received enough replacements to ensure that the grenadier regiments each had two full-sized battalions to work with. For a short time, the ad hoc Regiment "Ulrich," consisting of Latvian and German Police troops (including III./SS-Pol.Rgt.16), was attached to the 19.WGD. But it was soon in action with the SS-KGr. "Jeckeln" near the town of Appe.

On 19 August 1944 a Soviet armored thrust towards Riga from the Madona area succeeded in breaking the connections between the German defensive forces to the north of the Duna River and in Estonia from those in the rest of Latvia. Counterattacks by the hurriedly assembled SS Panzer Bde. "Gross" and the Armored Formation "Strachwitz" managed to drive back the enemy and restore the broken links. But throughout the remainder of the month readjustments had to be continually made in the frontlines to keep them intact.

Far to the south, the German Army Group Center had totally collapsed in one of the greatest catastrophes of the war, and in the newly reoccupied territories the Reds wasted no time in forcing every able-bodied male from age 16 to 60 into military service. Two new Ukrainian "Guards" Divisions, with about 80% of their strengths composed of these new Polish and Ukrainian conscripts, appeared in Latvia and a number of their soldiers were soon taken prisoner. During an interrogation with the 19.WGD Intelligence Officer, Hstuf. Burkhardt, one POW mentioned in perfect German that: "My brother is with the Waffen-SS in the 14th Galician Division!"

After a long period of relative calm, 19.WGD was ordered to begin falling back to a new, well-prepared defensive line (the so-called "Tirsa Positions"), in the night of 11/12 September. This was to be a three day operation, the end results of which would hopefully be significantly beneficial to the overall VI. SS Corps situation. The 19.WGD units to the north of Zeswaine (divisional left wing), had a pull-back of 20 km to even reach the main withdrawal route, while the divisional elements



Latvian SS volunteers after a hard battle in their homeland.

on the 19.WGD right wing, which faced to the south, had a much shorter distance to cover.

During the first day of the retreat the division fell back about 3 km which shortened the front up enough to enable the use of I./WGR 42 as a ready reserve. On the next day it proved possible to place all of WGR 42 into reserve as the division was not under any serious enemy pressure; for the most part the Reds had failed to notice the Latvian retreat and were in fact in the process of shelling the old 19.WGD positions in preparation for an attack on them.

Unlike the rest of the division, WGR 44 began to have problems early on in the retreat; its departure was soon noticed by the other side and it was up to its rearguard 3rd Company to keep back the pressure. For the entirety of 12 September the company held on to Kahrsdaba Hill and successfully tied down the enemy (37th Soviet Rifle Division). But when it disengaged the pursuit continued and numerous localized counterattacks were necessary to impede the communist advance.

On the other hand, WGR 43 on the division left wing, was able to make its retreat without any difficulty, commencing in the night of 12/13 September. By 15 September the "Tirsa" Positions had been occupied. The new lines ran from Leseere through Dobulji, Torchpavari, Saldati, Kaujpaperi, Kauhatschi, Tirseschi, Murani, and Grote, with WGR 42 on the divisional right (to the south), WGR 44 in the middle and WGR 43 on the left (to the north), with SS-Police Rgt. "Ulrich" situated just to the north of WGR 43.

In the evening of 15 September the Soviets reached the "Tirsa" Positions and immediately began applying the pressure. Near Torchpavari, WGR 44 was forced to counterattack to throw the enemy back. The following day was marked by further enemy attacks, all of them unsuccessful. An uneasy calm then set in, which lasted until the 19th of September. On that date the decision was made to evacuate the 18th German Army from Estonia

and VI. SS Corps and 19.WGD were ordered to assume yet another different line of defense which was designed to provide cover for the troops retreating by land from Estonia. So in the course of 19 September the "Tirsa" Positions were abandoned and a temporary line farther to the west was adopted. These intermediate positions came under immediate attack and heavy fighting broke out around the towns of Sehrmuskschi and Skujene. Over the next few days these defenses were also given up and by the night of 25 September a new permanent defensive line, called the "Sigulda" Positions, had been taken up. This line ran from Sibischl to Purlauri through Lagi, Maskaneni and Gut Kartuschl.

In an attempt to cut the route of retreat from Estonia the Soviets attacked the Nihtaure-Sigulda (Segewold) area with tank support. But only small portions of the 19.WGD front were engaged at any one time, which lessened the strain on the Division to a large extent. I./WGR 44 near Gut Kartuschl came under the greatest pressure but still managed to hold out. But events were soon to take a downturn. September 27th became a day of crisis for the Latvian division. SS Artillery Rgt. 19 ran out of ammunition and there were no stocks on hand to re-supply it with. This meant that clearly visible enemy attack assembly areas could not be shelled and disrupted. When the Reds launched their main assault (in the strength of at least nine battalions), the Latvian grenadiers were on their own - they had no heavy weapons support to back them up. The results were inevitable. I./WGR 44 had to give ground and was forced to counterattack three times in a desperate effort to keep the enemy at bay.

The rest of the regiment soon found itself in a similar bind. By noon it was totally engaged with no reserves to fall back on, so Gruf. Streckenbach was compelled to withdraw II./WGR 43 from its front sector to come to the aid of WGR 44. In the afternoon the Soviets redoubled their efforts, sending in waves of tanks to plaster the Latvian SS lines and forward machine gun nests from

a distance of about 200 meters. Actually, the tanks hesitated to move in any closer since they had no way of knowing that the Latvians were out of all heavy weapons ammo, including anti-tank shells. So the Red armor acted as close-support artillery for the assaulting infantry. The Latvian and Soviet soldiers soon found themselves locked in fierce close combat, and again and again it took last ditch counterattacks to save the day for 19.WGD. Twice during the night of 27/28 September the Reds had to be expelled from the Latvian lines in hand-to-hand combat, but in the morning hours of the 28th, ammunition arrived for SS-AR 19 and soon afterwards the tide of battle turned for good. With the help of accurate artillery support the Latvian SS grenadiers were able to seal off and eliminate the enemy incursions in the woods between Masratneeki and Maskanent.

There had also been heavy fighting in the sector of WGR 42, where a significant enemy breakthrough had been made. With the assistance of six German assault guns, I./WGR 42 was able to destroy the Red Army forces that got through and even kill a Soviet regimental commander in the process (his body was discovered on the battlefield). Over the next two days the battle continued all along the 19.WGD front, but at a dwindling pace. The fighting was hardest near the town of More, where for five full days some badly outnumbered Latvian troops

According to the "Netherlands Archives of the Conservative Revolution" (NACR), some 60,000 Dutchmen served in the ranks of the Waffen-SS alone during WWII in addition to those that served with other branches of the German armed forces. The head of NACR was a former Dutch SS officer (Paul Van Tienen), who now lives in exile in Spain. The "official" Dutch government line still has only 8,000 to 12,000 Dutchmen serving in the Waffen-SS, whom the establishment historians have classified "criminals" and "mental cases"! (11,000 Dutch Waffen-SS fatalities have been verified.)

The staffs of both XII. and XIII. SS Army Corps, that were formed in August 1944, drew troops from the following W-SS units:

Staff troops: From SS-Pz.Gr. Training/Replacement Bn. 5 stationed in Ellwangen.

SS Corps signals detachments: From SS Signals Replacement Det. in Nuremberg.

SS Corps transport companies: From the SS Motor Transport Training/Replacement Rgt. at Weimar/Buchenwald.

SS Corps vehicle repair crews, field police and field post office troops: Also the SS Motor Transport T & R Rgt.

SS Corps map and cartography sections: From the SS Artillery School I at Glau.

SS Corps artillery command staff troops: From the SS Artillery Training and Replacement Rgt. at Prague.

SS Corps engineer officers and troops: From SS Engineer T & R Bn. I at Dresden.

Fifteen captured SS soldiers from the 17th and 38th SS Divisions were murdered (shot in the back) by American troops in Eberstetten (near Pfaffenhofen on the Ilm) on 24 April 1945.

threw back every enemy attack. The situation was similar at Masratneeki, where 3rd Co./WGR 44 was finally forced to switch its positions because all of the company trenches and foxholes were heaped full of enemy corpses!

By the end of September 1944 the Red Army had again run out of steam in the Baltic area and the battle for Latvia's Livland Province came to an end. While the front quieted down, VI. SS Corps positions still became increasingly untenable in the wake of German withdrawals elsewhere and beginning on 7 October a retreat to Latvia's westernmost province of Kurland began. Here the Latvian SS Corps and the 19th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS would fight it out to the bitter end, demonstrating unparalleled heroism and tenacity in the process. The 19.WGD was joined in Kurland by the capable SS Artillery Rgt. 15, which had distinguished itself while providing support for German units in battles to the east of Riga and along the Duna River.

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THE 15TH LATVIAN SS DIVISION IN WEST PRUSSIA 1944-45

At the end of July 1944, the badly depleted 15th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (Latvian Nr. 1) which had taken severe losses during the heavy retrograde fighting near Opotschka, was temporarily dissolved. The divisional units that were still battle-worthy, chiefly SS-AR 15 and SS Engineer Battalion 15, were subordinated to the still functioning 19th WGD (Latvia Nr. 2), around Meirani and Jaunlubana.

The remaining soldiers from 15.WGD, who were mostly supply troops with a small cadre of officers and NCOs, were organized into a single regiment. On 3 August 1944 this regiment was located at Koknesse where it was forced to relinquish its weapons, which were to be sent to German forces in Italy. The Latvian soldiers were then put to work at building defenses on the left bank of the Duna River until they could be sent to Germany to serve as the nucleus for a new division.

In the last half of August 1944, the surviving core regiment was shipped from Riga to the German ports of Danzig and Gotenhafen. From there the Latvian SS troops travelled to the West Prussia troop training grounds that lay between the towns of Buetow and Berent. It was a good training facility but there was a shortage of barracks, so most of the Latvians had to be housed in unheated barns, sheds and horse stalls in the nearby villages. Due to forestry preservation regulations it was forbidden to cut down trees in the nearby woodlands, so there was only enough fuel available to keep the field kitchens functioning.

Thousands of new Latvian recruits, mostly those who had been born in the years 1925-26 were now sent to the West Prussia training camp to join the division. A good many of the men in the 1926 age bracket had come from the para-military state labor service that was functioning in Latvia under the local administration and many of them were reassigned to the SS Training and Replacement Bn. in Bruss.

The initial training program for the revamped 15.WGD was overseen by German officers, but they were gradually replaced by Latvians. Eventually Latvian officers filled all of the leadership positions up to and including that of regimental commander. While general troop training was going on, specialty courses for NCO and officer candidates were also conducted.

From the beginning the new 15.WGD suffered from severe shortages in heavy weaponry, transport vehicles and all types of clothing and equipment. It was not until the end of the year that warm winter apparel could be distributed by which time it had already been plenty cold. To serve as a nucleus for a new artillery regiment the men of I./SS-AR 15 and IV./SS-AR 19 were eventually sent to West Prussia from Kurland. The planned divisional training/formation program was slated to run from 6 September to 14 November 1944 in three phases of five, three and two weeks respectively, but by the end of the year things had still not been completed.

As of 20 September 1944 the strength figures for the 15.WGDdSS were as follows:

292 officers
1,522 NCOs
15,056 enlisted

16,870 total

Assigned to the division, but largely on duty in Kurland with the VI. SS Corps was the SS-AR 15 which had the following strength figures:

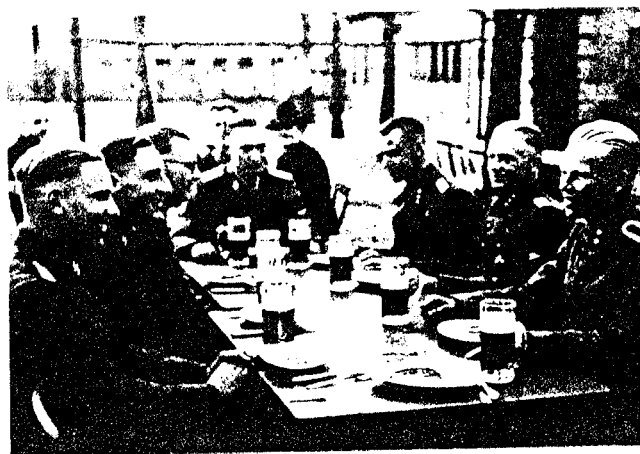
91 officers
379 NCOs
1,908 enlisted

This brought the divisional total to 19,248 men, all ranks.

On 21 and 22 January 1945, the 15th SS Division was ordered to prepare for imminent combat deployment; it was still in West Prussia undergoing training and formation but the frontlines had now almost caught up to it! The big Red Army offensive in the Vistula basin area of East Germany/Poland had gotten underway on 12 January 1945 and by the latter part of the month had caused the West Prussian troop training grounds to become threatened. That meant that the 15.WGD had to get ready for action in a hurry.

Because they did not have enough fully trained troops available, each of the three Latvian Grenadier Regiments (32, 33, 34), were forced to scale down from three battalion size to two battalion size. Only one full artillery detachment, with three light batteries and one heavy one, could be put in the field. A second detachment had been formed but did not have adequate weaponry or equipment. Thus the soldiers from the "third" grenadier battalions and the "second" artillery detachment were to be held back when the rest of the division went into battle. Later on it was decided that the "second" artillery detachment could be used as well, though it ran out of ammunition before seeing much action.

The deployment orders for the 15.WGD that had arrived on 21/22 January, directed it to march through Konitz to Vandsburg and prepare to intercept a Soviet force that was attacking from the south of there towards the northwest. The city of Nakel was to be retaken and a



Latvian SS officers during a special training course at the SS-Junkerschule "Toelz" in Bavaria.

new defensive line along the Vistula-Oder Canal was to be occupied with the divisional left wing (east) to be anchored in Bromberg. In the process the advancing Red Army units would hopefully be shattered and driven off to the south.

The Latvian SS troops started off for their deployment area without adequate transport. They even had to leave some of their munitions behind in Sophienwalde due to an inability to transport it. The net result of these problems was that the division was very late in getting to where it was sent. The first Latvian units to reach the combat zone were the truck transported 2nd and 3rd Companies of SS Fusilier Bn. 15 (recce) along with a platoon from 14th Co./WGR 34 that was attached to 3rd Company. The 1st Co./SS-Fus.Bn.15 was being dispatched to the front on bicycles, so it was a long while before it arrived on the scene.

The two Latvian recce companies disembarked from their trucks before the town of Immenheim shortly after mid-day on 24 January. The Soviets had just occupied the place a short time before so the Latvian SS troops immediately went on the attack and after a very fierce battle succeeded in securing Immenheim by 14:00. In the process 30 prisoners were taken along with four intact motor vehicles and much war material. In addition, some 1,000 Latvians belonging to construction regiments were liberated from Soviet captivity.

Following rapidly on the heels of the Fusilier Companies, was Waffen-Grenadier Rgt. 34, which also arrived at the front in trucks. WGR 34 proceeded to push on past the Fusilier Bn. and drive towards the important town of Nakel. The Latvian recce troops were then instructed to reconnoiter to the northeast of Nakel and set up a defensive line with strongpoints in Schloessen and Kruschdorf that would protect WGR 34's open left flank. Later in the afternoon the soldiers of WGR 34 attacked the Red Army positions in Nakel and by evening had driven

well into town. Very violent street fighting would continue into the next day when the communists were finally expelled. During the fighting at Immenheim and Nakel on the 24th, the Latvian grenadiers knocked out 12 T-34 tanks, mostly in close combat, and captured an armored car intact.

The I.Bn./WGR 32 was also in action on 24 January. It attempted to seize positions between Rosenheim and Hohenberg to the left of WGR 34 but was unable to take the latter town until the 25th, after much heavy fighting. On the same day the SS Fusilier Bn. 15 was able to reach the Bromberger Canal without any significant opposition. In the night of 25/26 January understrength units from WGR 32 were supposed to replace SS Fus.Bn. 15 which was then to be placed in combat reserve behind the lines at Immenheim.

The morning of 25 January also saw the arrival of WGR 33 at the front. It was ordered to assume a defensive line along the Nakel-Bromberg road from the village of Gruenberg to the road fork 6 km to the northwest of Bromberg. The truck-transported II./WGR 33 ran into a large enemy force at Haltenau while enroute to its designated positions and was forced to immediately go over on the attack. This action proved initially successful but then Soviet tanks joined in and the battalion (which had no heavy weapons), was pushed back to a line near the Schlaufensee which ran between two lakes.

The evening of 25 January saw tank-backed Red Army troops assault the Latvian SS lines from Nakel to Hohenberg, Schloessen and Kruschdorf. Many penetrations were made and much violent combat ensued. The youthful troops from WGR 34 were able to counterattack and throw the Reds back out of Nakel while destroying two tanks in the effort, but elsewhere the situation was more precarious.

The I./WGR 32 was forced out of Hohenberg, while SS Fus.Bn.15, the WGR 32 Staff Company and a German Army "Alarm" Company, were thrown back from Kruschdorf. In a heroic effort the three latter units counter-attacked and retook Kruschdorf but the WGR 32 Staff Co. and the German "Alarm" Co. were largely destroyed in the battle.

On 26 January the Reds began applying pressure along the entire 15th SS Divisional front. Particular emphasis was placed on attempting to outflank the Latvians on their largely open left (east) flank. Despite the enemy efforts, WGR 34 was able to hang on in Nakel on this day, but other units were not so lucky. SS Fusilier Bn. 15 (1st and 2nd Companies), became surrounded at about 01:00 and orders were given for it to withdraw to a line running from Grummenhof to Grenzdorf, but these came too late. The only thought now was just to get out from the Red Army entrapment. A breakout attempt by the battalion met with savage resistance and nearly all of the officers were killed. In the end only a small contingent got through to the divisional lines at Immenheim. These survivors were then incorporated into the battalion's 3rd Company, which had not been engaged.

Enemy breakthroughs were also reported to the west of Nakel, in territory held by a battle-group from the 11th SS Pz.Gr.Div. "Nordland" (Kampfgruppe "Ziegler"). This, together with enemy inroads to the east, posed a great danger to the withdrawal route of the most advanced Latvian elements. The key position on the division's left wing was held down by WGR 33 around the Schlaufen See; if that went by the boards the whole division would collapse. Boosted by the arrival of II./WGR 32 on the morning of 26 January, which helped fill in the gap left by the mauled Fusilier Bn. and I./WGR 32, WGR 33 was able to repel the enemy throughout the day, despite



SS-Oberführ. Karl Burk, last commander 15.SS Division, 15 February 1945 to May 1945.



heavy frost, a snowstorm and a lack of heavy weapons.

In the early afternoon, the divisional commander, Oberfuehrer von Obwurzer, made a frontline inspection of WGR 34. While enroute to the command post of the attached I./WGR 32, von Obwurzer disappeared. He apparently crossed into enemy held territory and was killed, either while a captive or while trying to escape from captivity. Taking over the division on a temporary basis was Oberfuehrer Adolf Ax, the chief-of-staff of the new XVI. Army Corps which was in the vicinity. A new permanent commander, Standartenfuehrer Eduard Deisenhofer (formerly acting CO of the 17th SS Pz.Gr.Div. "Goetz von Berlichingen"), but he too became missing while trying to find the divisional headquarters. He is rumored to have suffered the same fate as Oberfhr. von Obwurzer.

At 18:00 on the 26th the foremost Latvian SS units, WGR 34 and I./WGR 32 were ordered to pull back from Nakel to a line running from Erlau to Gernhelm to Lindenburg, before they became encircled. True to form, the orders arrived too late; these troops were already cut off! It was left to I. Detachment/SS-AR 15 to get them out of the mess. This unit swung into action, bombarding the enemy troops that occupied the escape route along the Nakel-Immenheim road. Fortunately there was enough ammunition on hand to do the job required and after the enemy troops that occupied the escape route along the Nakel-Immenheim road. Fortunately there was enough ammunition on hand to do the job required and after absorbing a severe pounding, the Red Army troops fled, opening up the road to the men of WGR 34 and I./WGR 32.

All elements were safely able to reach Immenheim except for I./WGR 34, which was stuck out on the regimental right (western) wing and got separated from the main body of the regiment in a driving snowstorm. The bad weather also shielded the battalion from the foe

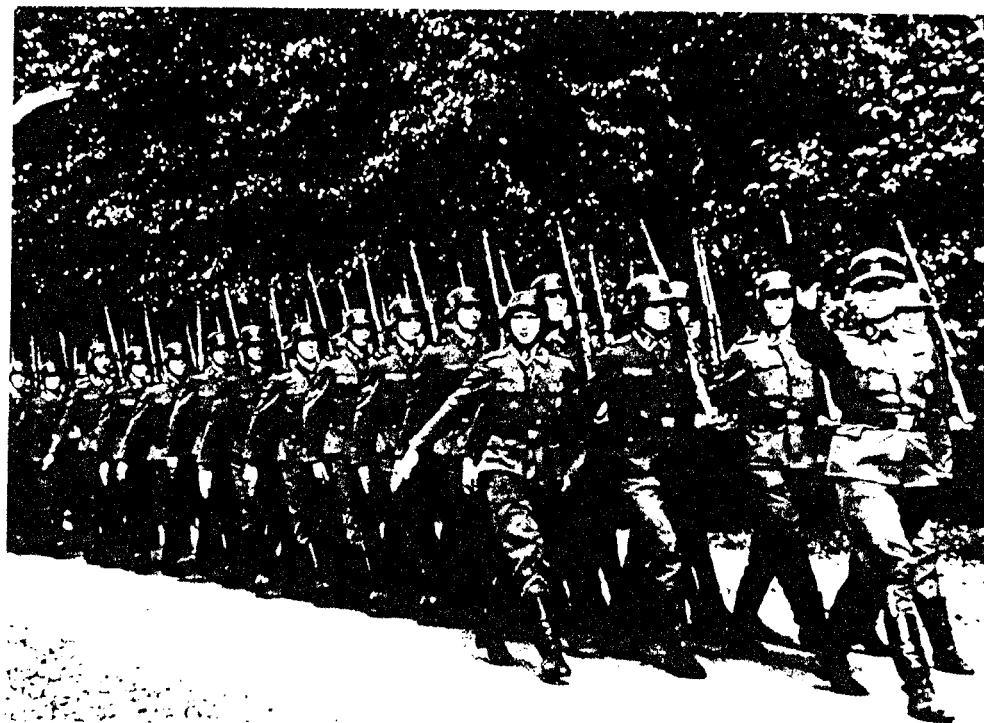
SS-Oberfhr. Borchert, the Inspector of SS NCO Schools, inspects Latvian NCO trainees at SS NCO School Arnheim in Holland.

and it retreated unmolested in a northerly direction. After a journey of some 50 km, the battalion reached the village of Wittun, 2 km west of Vandsburg, at about 23:00 on 27 January.

In the night of 26/27 January, WGR 33 was given the task of occupying a new defensive line running from Gruenhausen through Hohenwalde to Bachwitz. The overall battlefield situation continued to deteriorate on the 27th. Both the divisional left wing and the main withdrawal route from Immenheim to Vandsburg were threatened. WGR 34, I./WGR 32, SS Fusilier Bn. 15 and SS Engineer Bn. 15 were all so badly battered that they were no longer considered fit for combat duty. The responsibility for the defense of Immenheim rested with WGR 33, but the regiment was soon forced to give ground as enemy tanks poured into the town.

The other divisional units continued to retreat and regroup as best as possible. SS Fusilier Bn. 15, which a few days earlier had consisted of some 600 men, now had barely 250 soldiers (most from the 3rd Co.), and its former 2nd Co. had been reduced to a mere squad in size. In the course of the 26th this battalion (or what was left of it), was subordinated to a battle-group from SS Pz.Gr.Rgt. 48 "General Seyffardt"/"Nederland" Division, under the command of Sturmabannfuehrer Joachim. Consisting of a strong battalion of Dutch and ethnic-German volunteers, Kampfgruppe "Joachim" had the mission of trying to cover the withdrawal of the 15th SS Division's extended right wing (or southwestern flank).

The Fusilier Bn. was sent out in the night of 26/27 January to scout out the terrain around Herzfeld, about 4 km to the south of Immenheim. No enemy contact



Latvian soldiers of 15.SS Division on parade before the Inspector of the Latvian Legion, Gruf. Bangerskis.

was made during the night but at 10:00 on 27 January, enemy tanks attacked all along the front held by KGr. "Joachim," forcing it to withdraw. In the process the Latvian recce troops became separated. It was now learned that strong, motorized enemy forces had been observed moving along the Zempelburg-Kujan Road, a dramatic indication that the Reds had gotten in behind the Latvian division and were in fact about 50 km to the rear of the advanced SS Fusilier Bn. 15. This information only intensified the urgency of the situation.

The remnants of the Fusilier Bn. found themselves almost alone in covering the withdrawal of the rest of the division. Their job was to slow the Red advance wherever possible. Finally, the battalion commander decided to make a stand at Klarahoeh. Here the Latvian SS troops dug-in and waited for their pursuers to arrive. A Soviet advance party soon hove into view, totally obvious of the fact that the Latvians were waiting for them. At the very last minute the Latvians opened up with everything they had, catching the surprised communists in a withering fire. The enemy vanguard was shattered, but it didn't take them long to regroup and in a very short time the battle was on in earnest. After mutual exchanges of artillery fire, both sides fought out for the town of Klarahoeh and the place changed hands many times over, but more importantly, the Reds could not get through. Some precious time had been bought.

Brought to a halt by the brave soldiers of the SS Fusilier Bn. 15, the Soviets attempted to outflank the Latvians and seize the Vandsburg-Immenheim road farther to the north. This effort was blunted by a task force from WGR 33 which blocked off the road about 3 km to the northwest of Bartenau. In the afternoon of the 27th, Soviet armored forces managed to penetrate as far as Zempelburg, to the north of Vandsburg. That meant that the withdrawal route of the 15.WGD north to the city of Konitz had been severed. The only way out now lay

to the northwest through Flatow and Jastrow to Landeck, where it was hoped a link-up could be made with the German 32nd Infantry Division.

In the course of 27 January, the 15.WGD was somehow able to get about eight artillery batteries into operation. But there were all sorts of difficulties. The 6th and 12th Batteries had been drawn by horses from the West Prussia training grounds to Bartenau. They were then rushed into firing positions to the north of Immenheim but soon ran out of ammunition. The 1st and 8th Batteries, which were motorized, ran out of fuel for their vehicles and had to abandon them for horses.

At 00:00 on 28 January, Waffen-Standartenfuehrer Janums, the commander of WGR 33, was ordered to free the Vandsburg-Immenheim Road near Bartenau and begin a withdrawal to Wilkenswalde in the northwest. The II./WGR 33 was able to successfully carry out this mission and drove the Soviets away with a sharp attack. At Vandsburg, troops from the SS Signals Detachment 15 and I./WGR 34 had to hold off enemy forces advancing from Zempelburg in the north, until the rest of the division had passed on to the west. They then took off for Wilkenswalde, the designated divisional assembly area, which they reached somewhat before midnight on the 28th. The security for this town was the responsibility of WGR 34.

Some of the retreating Latvian elements had to destroy equipment that they could not carry along. The 2nd Battery/SS-AR 15 for instance, was forced to spike a couple of field pieces that were no longer transportable, due to the fact that there were no intact caissons left to haul them along with. Fortunately the division was able to regroup in Wilkenswalde and find itself more or less intact. This despite the heavy losses that had been taken

and the great amount of confusion that reigned at the time. Only the SS Engineer Bn. 15 was written off for the moment; it had been shredded to pieces in street fighting in Nakel and now could muster only a mere 40 men. Vehicle losses were extensive, since many had been abandoned due to a lack of fuel.

Although there had been no general collapse, the fighting still had been somewhat of a disaster. Two divisional commanders and a regimental commander had been lost. The morale and fighting spirit in the division, which had previously been quite high, now took a nose dive, due mainly to the effects of the Soviet tanks, which seemed virtually unstoppable to the Latvians.

In the post-mortem of the events (as summarized after the war by Oberfhr. Ax for American Military Intelligence), it was noted that the artillery had arrived too late and in too little quantity to do much good, and after two

days or so the ammunition had run out. Blocked roads and enemy inroads had prevented the divisional supply column from getting through during the fighting, so there had been no resupply possible. Due to the wounding of Waf.-Ostufaf. Celle, the CO of WGR 32, and the lack of an available replacement, the regiment was temporarily split up and subordinated to the commanders of WGR 33 (Janums) and WGR 34 (Viksne or Kilitis). Waf.-Stubaf. Rubenis next took command but he was killed-in-action near Flederborn on 4 February 1945.

The question now remained as to how the shaken 15th SS Division would hold up in the critical days that lay ahead? The answer would not be long in coming as the Soviets began a new assault on the division in the morning hours of 28 January. The subsequent events will be covered in a future issue of SIEGRUNEN. §



SS-Kampfgruppe "Thurm" was formed from troops from the 35th SS-Polizei Grenadier Division in March/April 1945. Its commander was Hstuf. Warland.

At the beginning of 1944, some 200 Latvian volunteers were under training at the SS NCO School "Arnheim" in Holland. Their training course lasted until 23 May 1944. They were considered exceptionally intelligent and apt pupils. The Latvians were concentrated in the 1st Training Co. under the command of Ostuf. Schmidt (ex-Rgt. "Germania"/"Wiking" Div.) who was later replaced by Ostuf. Pahnke. The final field testing of the Latvian NCO candidates was witnessed by Gruf. Demelhuber (Waffen-SS C-in-C Netherlands) and by Oberfhr. Borchert, the Inspector of Waffen-SS NCO Schools.

An assault gun company for SS Anti-tank Det. 15/15th Latvian SS Div. was formed at the SS "Bohemia-Moravia" Training Grounds near Prague in late 1944. Outside of German specialists and technical personnel the unit contained one Latvian officer (Ustuf.), five Latvian NCOs and 65 Latvian enlisted men. The Latvians were considered well-disciplined, outstanding soldiers.

On 21 January 1945, the company began a rail journey to the Konitz Training Grounds, south of Danzig, where it was to join up with the rest of the 15th WGD. Unfortunately the extremely fluid nature of the Eastern Front at that time, which was buckling under the impact of the Soviet winter offensive, caused the transport train to be halted west of Kuestrin and new orders to be issued. The company was now to be used in the defense of the Oder River Front. However, on 29 January, the Latvians were detached from the company and sent by rail to Stettin where they were supposed to find the 15th SS Divisional personnel reporting station with the hope that they could eventually join the rest of the division proper.

The German members of the company along with the assault guns were used to form the nucleus of SS-Anti-tank Det. 561 under Hstuf. Lobmeier, which served under the control of V. SS Mountain Corps on the Oder Front. [See Siegrunen #29 for more details.]

THE FINNISH VOLUNTEER BATTALION OF THE WAFFEN-SS IN THE MIUS SECTOR APRIL-AUGUST 1942

After having been withdrawn from Mius River positions around Olchovskij-Skelanskij on 25 April 1942, the Finnish Volunteer Battalion (which was temporarily functioning as IV.Btl./"Nordland" Rgt./SS Div."Wiking"), was reassembled in the town of Many. Following a few brief hours of rest and replenishment of supplies, weapons and equipment, the 1st, 3rd and 4th Companies of the battalion were loaded on troop transport trucks for Alexandrovka. The 2nd Co., which was the last to leave the Finnish positions, followed a day later.

While this was going on the company and platoon leaders were assembled for a briefing on the battalion's new sector. Towards evening on the 26th, the Finnish companies began relieving II./Rifle Rgt. 64 of the 16th Panzer Div. in the vicinity of Demidovka. At 21:30 the battalion commander, Stubaf. Hans Collani reported to the "Nordland" Rgt'l. HQ at Alexandrovka that the change-of-position had been accomplished.

The new battalion sector was situated in another bend of the Mius River. The right boundary line (which was also the "Wiking" Divisional boundary) ran through the north part of Schaposchnikovo and the right hand neighbor was the 125th Wurttemberg Infantry Div. whose emblem was an upright weasel. The left boundary of the battalion ran just south of Alexandrovka and intersected Krynka Creek, which ran through the battalion positions to a point where it reached the Mius. The left hand neighbor was I./"Nordland." The Mius River flowed into the battalion sector from the northeast and was soon joined by the Krynka before meandering on south to the Sea of Azov which it entered near Taganrog.

West of the Mius the battalion sector was dominated by two hills, numbered by compass as 115.2 and 114.9. The town of Demidovka lay about in the center of the Finnish lines and it was surrounded by fruit orchards which had begun coming into bloom. The battalion command post was situated in a farm house in the middle of the village. Upon the roof of the house an observation post with trench binoculars was set up and this provided a good view deep into enemy held territory.

The town was still occupied by civilians - virtually all old men, women and children - who worked as "helpers" and laborers for the soldiers. There was no hard work involved; mainly just everyday chores: washing clothes, caring for the poultry and livestock that went into the rations, and heating the inevitable Finnish sauna. In return for their efforts the civilians were given access to the field kitchen and received the same provisions that went to the frontline troops.

The first order of business for the Finnish volunteers was to rebuild and refortify their positions for better concealment and better protection. Work on new bunkers started immediately, even at the battalion command

post. Everyone affiliated with the HQ was required to do his (and/or her) share of the spade work, including the battalion commander, the adjutant and the orderly officer. The two female Russian housekeepers employed at the HQ also joined in. The well-constructed command bunker was completed and dedicated on 15 June 1942, which also happened to be the first anniversary of the battalion. In celebration of these twin events alcoholic beverages (some of dubious manufacture) were freely passed out and a supporting artillery battery fired a salvo in honor of the Finns.

During the battalion's first weeks in its new positions, the front remained quiet although quite a bit of traffic was observed in the enemy rear area. Deserters who came over to the German side stated that there were three Red Army regiments opposing the Finns, but they were unable to provide very much corroborating detail. But the information was worrisome to Stubaf. Collani and he conferred with his officers about stiffening the battalion's defenses.

There was considerable enemy air reconnaissance activity over the area, possibly because the Soviets were expecting a German offensive at any time. On 2 May, very heavy enemy traffic was observed behind the Soviet lines, and Red scouting parties began testing the German front.

In conjunction with a general internal reconstruction of the German Army's regiments and battalions, the Finnish Battalion disbanded its 4th Machine Gun Company on 12 May 1942 on regimental orders. The 4th Company platoons then became MG Platoons for the three rifle companies. They were each joined by mortar squads, each of which contained two 8 cm mortars. This new arrangement gave the companies better support and allowed for a more streamlined resupply process. The changeover was completed by 15 May.

At the same time the MG Company was disbanded a new Heavy Weapons Company for the battalion was formed. It consisted of engineer, anti-tank, infantry gun and signals platoons. The nucleus personnel were drawn from larger specialist units (presumably from within Rgt. "Nordland") and were supplemented by newly trained Finnish recruits and replacements. Hstuf. Brueckner was named commander of this new company on 4 July 1942.

On 16 May, the Finnish General Talvela along with a small entourage, paid a visit to the battalion HQ in Demidovka. He had succeeded Col. Horn as the chairman of the recruiting commission for the battalion in Finland. He received a hearty welcome from Stubaf. Collani then visited with his fellow countrymen in their field positions. Afterwards he visited the billets of the reserve company in Alexandrovka, where the battalion's permanent quarters,



sick bay, laundry and sauna facilities were all located.

In a farewell speech to members of the battalion, Gen. Talvela praised the high degree of battle readiness and morale that he found in the unit. Stubaf. Collani thanked him in the name of the battalion for this honor and expressed the hope that the unit would continue to fulfill the tradition of German-Finnish military comradeship that had existed in the Finnish-manned Jaeger Btl. 27, that had fought in the Imperial German Army in World War I.

The commander of the "Wiking" Div., Brigfhr. Steiner, had long sought the permanent incorporation of the Finnish Battalion (nominally an independent element) into one of his regiments on the grounds that it was too small to "stand on its own" and stood to suffer too greatly without the adequate backup of a larger unit structure. So on 23 May, the battalion officially became III./"Nordland" (the old III. Btl. having previously been dispersed to fill up gaps in the I. and II. Battalions), although it had been temporarily attached to the regiment all along. This new status changed the numbering of the companies from 1, 2, 3, 4/Finnish Vol.Btl. to 9, 10, 11, 12/Rgt. "Nordland." At the same time the "Wiking" Division received a tank detachment and was upgraded into a Panzergrenadier Division, with its infantry regiments gaining the same status.

The battalion continued to be known as the "Finnish Battalion" to the men of the "Wiking" Division and the German designation "finnisches" remained in the unit title as follows: III. (finn.) Btl./"Nordland." As an added gesture of goodwill to the Finns who may have resented losing their quasi-independent status, the "Finnish Lion" emblem became the new tactical sign for the "Nordland" Regiment.

In the area behind the Mius River hills, the battalion reserve company (the frontline companies rotated into reserve), continued with operational training that concentrated on efficient combat coordination with the new heavy weapons contingents. During especially tranquil periods even the frontline companies were pulled back behind the hills for training exercises, leaving only weak picket lines up front for security duties.

The Germans were preparing for a new offensive and the Soviets knew it. This caused them to increase their

Finnish Volunteer Battalion officers in Alexandrovka, May 1942. Left to right: Ustuf. Vaaramo, Hstuf. Ladau, Ustuf. Ertel, and Ustuf. Pohjanlehto.

scouting activities to try and get a feel for when things would break loose. In the night of 20/21 May 1942 a company strength enemy reconnaissance force tried to penetrate the forward positions of I./"Nordland," but was driven back in a violent little skirmish that cost the communist side 25 fatalities. The retreating foe also left behind mine clearing equipment (since the battalion's positions had been protected by a mine field) and numerous weapons. Some prisoners were taken and they stated that the raiding party had a mission designed to destabilize the German Front and take captives for interrogation. This brought the watchfulness of the regiment to a high state of alert.

At 02:00 on 3 June, Ostuf. Hilker, CO of 10./III./"Nordland," telephoned battalion HQ to report mine explosions near the foremost company outpost and the appearance of a five-man enemy scout troop on the east bank of the Mius. Ten minutes later Hilker learned that the forward outpost in the Mius bend had been assaulted by three separate enemy reconnaissance parties, one of which got confused in a minefield and fled leaving a wounded man behind who was captured. The two other groups were dispersed in a firefight.

Ostuf. Hilker, whose nickname was "Bobby," had been a decathlon athlete before the war and had proven himself a calm, prudent and able frontline officer. His company anchored the left wing of the battalion to the west of the Mius, with the command post in Kolchos on the Demidovka-Alexandrovka road. To the company's left was 3./"Nordland" from I.Btl. which maintained an advance post on the other side of the Mius bend, opposite 10th Company's outpost. Both were prominent targets for raids by the other side, but had the advantage of being on high ground and were always able to repel all attacks.

On 3 June 1942, Stubaf. Collani sent a congratulatory telegram in the name of the battalion to the Finnish Armed Forces C-in-C, Field Marshall Mannerheim on the occasion of his birthday. The Field Marshall telegraphed back his appreciation on the 14th. On 15 June both the Rgt'l. CO, Ostuf. Fritz von Scholz, and Stubaf.



Collani issued messages of congratulations to the Finnish battalion on its 1st "birthday"; there was also quite a lively celebration in the newly completed battalion command bunker.

The "testing" of the German Front continued and at about 21:00 on 17 June a 30-man Soviet raiding party hit the Finnish Battalion's right sector only to be driven off in a hail of heavy defensive fire. On 2 July at about 10:00, Stubaf. Collani was at the forward outpost of 10th Co. when three Red Army men tried to slip by. Without hesitation Collani yelled at them to surrender, and they meekly flung down their weapons and threw up their hands! The next day also saw an enemy scout troop driven off by fire from this outpost.

Every day the German artillery laid down a harassing fire on the Soviet lines and on 25 June a battery expended a barrage of "Goebbelsgranaten" - shells filled with propaganda leaflets - on Stara Rotovka. These special deliveries usually brought in a goodly number of deserters.

On 28 June 1942 the northern wing of Army Group "South" led by VI. Panzer Army began its summer offensive. The objective: the conquest of Stalingrad. The southern wing of the Army Group was scheduled to attack towards the Caucasus Mountains on 13 July with 1st Panzer Army in the vanguard. The goal here was to secure the region's oilfields. The 298th, 73rd and 125th Infantry Divisions had been assigned the job of breaking through the enemy frontlines for 1st Panzer Army's LVII. Panzer Corps under Gen. Kirchner, and once a penetration had been made the SS Pz.Gr.Div. "Wiking" was to be at the spearhead of the follow-up attack.

The only problem with this scenario was that the "Wiking" no longer had enough operational motor vehicles for all of its troops, so a portion of the division had to wait behind on the Mius for a new shipment of vehicles from Germany. The elements chosen to stay behind were the entire SS Pz.Gr.Rgt. "Westland" and the III. Battalions of Rgts. "Germania" and "Nordland." Whatever trucks and cars these units had were to be turned over to the rest of the "Wiking" forces.

In any event, the "Wiking" troops soon gave up their frontline positions. Troops from the neighboring Gr.Rgt. 419 from the "Weasel" Div. (125th Inf.) took over 10./"Nordland's" sector on 8 July and the rest of the Finnish battalion's positions by 13 July. The 125th Division would be in the first attack wave to open the door for the mobile, armored forces waiting behind.

The III./"Nordland" relocated to rest quarters at Mokryj Jelantschick, while the other "Nordland" elements were placed on alert in Alexandrovka in preparation for their

Hstuf. Brueckner and 4./Finnish Volunteer Battalion, Summer 1942.

role in the new offensive. From 16 to 19 July all of the remaining vehicles from the Finnish Battalion would be redistributed to I. and II./"Nordland" for the attack on Rostov.

The Finns were to remain in Mokryj Jelantschick for some time to come. To keep his young and impatient Finnish soldiers occupied, Stubaf. Collani devised a three-week refresher training course, at the end of which he hoped new vehicles would be available to enable them to catch up with the rest of the regiment.

The III./"Nordland's" stay in Mokryj Jelantschick actually lasted from 13 July to 10 August 1942. The first days were devoted to refurbishing weapons and equipment. Then specialty training classes began for the engineers, signal personnel and messengers. Extensive training also went on in map reading, compass orientation and motor vehicle maintenance and operation; the latter course being for new replacement drivers.

For a period of time in the absence of Stubaf. Collani, Hstuf. Brueckner, the CO of 12th Heavy Company, served as the acting battalion commander. Brueckner was a veteran of I./"Nordland." In a training accident on 1 August 1942 he was badly wounded when one of 12th Company's field pieces misfired. He died not long afterwards in the field hospital and his replacement was the Finnish Hstuf. Ladau who had just recovered from a wound suffered on 26 March 1942.

Free time in Mokryj Jelantschick was devoted to sports, concerts from the "Nordland" band and a good deal of fraternizing with the local women, which included mixed songfests along the now peaceful banks of the Mius. The battalion medical officers and dentist worked over all of the men to make sure that they would be in good "shape" for the strenuous days sure to come.

In early August the promised motor transport vehicles began to arrive from Germany and by the 8th, III./"Nordland" had received the following allotment: 78 light-to-medium trucks, 8 heavy trucks for the 12th Company, a Mercedes command vehicle for Stubaf. Collani and nine "Opel-Kadetts" for the staff and supply officers. On 9 August orders arrived for the battalion to rejoin the "Nordland" Regiment in the vicinity of Malkop to the south of the Caucasus Mountains. The bloodiest phase in the history of the Finnish Volunteer Battalion was about to begin.

Stiftelsen norsk Okkupasjonshistorie, 2014

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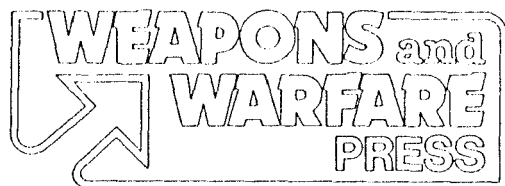
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