



VOICES OF THE WAFFEN SS

GERRY VILLANI





Voices of the Waffen SS

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“I can assure you that the Leibstandarte enjoys an outstanding reputation, not only with its own superiors but with its Army comrades also. Every division wishes it had the Leibstandarte as its neighbor. Its inner discipline, cool daredevilry, cheerful enterprise, unshakeable fortitude even when things become difficult or serious, exemplary toughness and its camaraderie, all of these are outstanding and cannot be surpassed.”

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Foreword

“SS”, two crooked little letters. Who would guess that two little letters could strike fear and terror into the hearts of millions? Yet they did just that during WWII! They represented a military division so dedicated to their country and their leader like no other in history! Hitler’s Waffen SS fought like no others and some of its members committed atrocities that have few equals in history! Taught and said to be Supermen, over and over again, they actually started to believe it themselves! These are the pictures painted of the Waffen SS by the events of WWII.

History is written - for the most part - by the victors. The victors have the means and the resources to write history however they see it fit, with little recourse by the defeated. Example being my ancestors: they fought for the South in the American Civil War. Portrayed as slave owners, rebels, and scum by the North, and yet in many cases they never owned slaves, never wanted to secede from Union, and were forced into the service of the Confederacy. They were said to be evil, racist, and full of hate! Yet they were just people who lived, loved, hurt, bled, and died just like the forces of the North. They had stories too, but history hid those and they were not told at the time of the victory of the North. So it was also with the Waffen SS. Portrayed as evil incarnate, devils, and scum! Yet, they also lived, loved, hurt, bled, and died just like those who fought against them. They prayed to the same God, they were Husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. But for the most part, we see only the side of the story written by the victors! Now some of these stories we hear are true of course. There were those in the Waffen SS who committed horrible atrocities, we can’t deny that fact! War crimes were committed and punishment of those involved was totally justified. But there were those who were just soldiers, fighting for their fatherland and following orders. And there were those who were pressed into service with the Waffen SS, the conscripts... What these men all have in common are stories! They all have stories and why were they not told? Not because they were shy or embarrassed about their past. No, because the world has never heard them, until now.

Gerry Villani has endeavored to write those stories so that these veteran’s voices could be heard. Through a labor of love and dedication, he has traveled and listened to Waffen SS veterans, and is now the mouthpiece for those who could not tell their stories! Ladies and Gentlemen, turn these pages and read and listen! Listen to the stories of the men who

fought in the Waffen SS! I now give you my friend - and I'm proud to call him my brother - Gerry Villani, or better said, I give you the "Voices of the Waffen SS."

Gary Grindstaff, Minnesota 2015

Introduction

The SS oath of Loyalty:

"Ich schwöre Dir, Adolf Hitler, als Führer und Kanzler des Deutschen Reiches Treue und Tapferkeit. Wir geloben Dir und den von Dir bestimmten Vorgesetzten Gehorsam bis in den Tod. So wahr mir Gott helfe!"

"I vow to you, Adolf Hitler, as Führer and chancellor of the German Reich, loyalty, and bravery. I vow to you and to the leaders that you set for me, absolute allegiance until death. So help me God!"

The Waffen SS or the Armed SS were Hitler's elite forces during WWII. They were the forces that were feared by their enemies but at the same time admired by their allies. The two lightning bolts on the collar tab and on their helmets were the mark of the soldiers of the new order. They believed in the final victory of the Reich and were loyal to Adolf Hitler until death. The history of the Waffen SS goes back to the early days of National Socialism when they were called the SS. The *Schutzstaffel* or SS, formed in April 1925, was a section of the SA or *Sturmabteilung* and functioned as a personal bodyguard for Adolf Hitler. However, in 1923, a small group of 8 men formed the *Stabwache* or Staff Guard for the personal protection of Adolf Hitler, under the command of Julius Schreck. Not that long after its formation, it was renamed to *Stosstrupp* Hitler. After the failed Beer Hall Putsch of Hitler and the National-Socialist Party in 1923, the SA and Stosstrupp were abolished. After Hitler's release from Landsberg prison, he immediately reinstated the SA and Stosstrupp. The Stosstrupp was then renamed to *Schutzkommando* which had the same functions as the Stosstrupp: the personal protection of Hitler and prominent members of the Party. Then finally on November 9 – 1925 the *Schutzstaffel* or SS was born. What started as a small *Gruppe* in the late 1920s with only a few hundred members the SS expanded quickly in the early 1930s under the command of Heinrich Himmler, who became the *Reichsführer SS* in 1929. Actually, the rank of *Reichsführer* became official in 1934 after the Night of the Long Knives (Röhm Putsch). By 1932 the SS had reached more than 50,000 members and by the end of the next year, they were more than 200,000 men strong. The uniform of the SS was, before 1932, the same as the SA – a brown uniform – with a black tie and hat bearing the *Totenkopf* or death's head. The Totenkopf was the symbol of the SS which meant defiance of death. The Totenkopf, however, was a symbol that had been used before in history by other armies (Austro-Hungarian for example). But it also meant loyalty and obedience until death. This loyalty and obedience until death can be found again in the oath of allegiance to Hitler for the SS. From 1932 a new uniform was adopted and its color became black. The SS runes on the collar tabs symbolized the victory – double *Sieg* rune - and were also the symbol of the elite. There was also a difference in the rank system with the regular armed forces. The SS rank system was something completely different than the one that the armed forces were using. The rank system of the SS was based on the rank system of the early Freikorps, which were adopted by the SA – and the SS was a part of the SA at the very beginning. The main reason why the SS opted for a different rank system than the Wehrmacht was to show that they were independent of the armed forces.

However, each rank in the SS had its equivalent in the armed forces. Himmler and Heydrich – Heydrich who later became the *Reichsprotektor* of Bohemia and Moravia - expanded the numbers of the SS and soon, by the beginning of the war, the total number reached easily 250,000 members. They created the security and intelligence service of the SS, better known as the SD or *Sicherheitsdienst*. In 1934 Himmler obtained the ultimate power over the police forces outside Prussia and the *Gestapo* or Secret Police. That same year the SS became the supervising authority of the concentration camps as well. In 1936 Himmler became the head of all the police forces within the Reich.



SS soldiers during parade – pre-1939 – source unknown

It was in 1934 that the SS-VT or *SS-Verfügungstruppe* (SS dispositional troops) was created and three regiments were formed: the *SS-Standarte Germania* (Northern Germany) and *SS-Standarte Deutschland* (Southern Germany); the SS-VT was also incorporated in the *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*, Hitler's personal bodyguards, in the Berlin-Brandenburg area. These three regiments were modeled on the regiments of the *Heer* or Army. In 1936 the regiments *Leibstandarte* and *Deutschland* participated in the occupation of the Rhineland. By 1937 the SS was divided into three branches: the [Allgemeine SS](#) (General SS), the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* (SS-VT), and the [SS-Totenkopfverbände](#) (SS-TV) which administered the [concentration camps](#) – not to be confused with the SS Totenkopf Division. Both the [SS-Totenkopfverbände](#) and the Totenkopf Division – formed on a later date of course - were under the supervision of Theodor Eicke. In 1938 the SS-VT was active during the *Anschluss* of Austria – the incorporation of Austria into the Reich - and with the annexation of Sudetenland. Under Paul Hausser they were trained to become a fully effective combat force so that by 1939 they could be deployed during the invasion of Poland and in 1940 in France. In July 1940 the name SS-VT was changed to Waffen SS by Hitler. The *Allgemeine SS* remained an entity on its own and was not part of the Waffen SS. The *Allgemeine SS* was under command of the *SS-Hauptamt* or SS Main Office.

In total there would be 38 Waffen SS Divisions during the course of the war, a powerful army comprised of Germans, ethnic Germans, and many other nationalities. The first European Army in history!



Hitler inspecting SS troops in Klagenfurt 1938 – courtesy of the Bundesarchiv

The Waffen SS fought parallel to the Wehrmacht, or armed forces, on all theaters in Europe and Russia. Because it expanded ultimately to 38 divisions the Waffen SS became the fourth branch of the Wehrmacht. However, the Waffen SS was autonomous in its structure. It was common to see Waffen SS field units directly placed under the command of the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW)* or the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces. In the occupied territories, the Waffen SS expanded their numbers by engaging volunteers into their ranks. The Waffen SS who was initially a “German (Political) Army” became an international army. They had members from almost every European country and Russia among their ranks. It is estimated that the Waffen SS was one million members strong, from which only 40% was German. The remaining 60% were all foreign volunteers.

What made the Waffen SS so different from other army components was that they fought with such a passion and dedication which was never seen before. In the first place, their passion came from the fact that they were true patriots and conservatives, and many of them had a vision about how Europe would be after the war. They were concerned about the future of Europe and their people, which is very admirable. These men knew that their most precious possession was their people and for the sake of their people they would fight. For them, their sacrifice was their glory of giving because when one sacrifices himself for his people then he can walk with his head held high. But is there any difference between soldiers from other armies? Probably not as any other soldier in the world would fight for his country in the hope to preserve his country and the future of his people. Every person is concerned about the well being and future of his nation! But sometimes this passion, dedication, and patriotism, changed into brutality and murder. Of course, it was just a small percentage of the entire organization that committed these crimes and it remains unforgivable! Unfortunately, even today similar crimes are still being committed by armies in ongoing conflicts.

Waffen SS soldiers were just soldiers but mentioned two features which had a significant impact on the entire organization: the ideological foundation during the training and selection methods for leadership, and the incorporation of a mythical Nordic heritage and German history. These factors ensured that the Waffen SS had a superior esprit de corps and a stronger appeal than the regular German Army units. Unit names,

such as “*Hohenstaufen*“, “*Totenkopf*“, and “*Götz von Berlichingen*” echoed the glorious past of the “Life Guards of the Bavarian King”, the “Death Head’s Hussars of Frederic the Great”, and the “Imperial Knight with the iron fist.”

The Waffen SS – created as the ultimate racial elite of the Reich - accepted many foreign volunteers in their ranks when the war progressed. Many of these foreigners were also touched in their nationalist or patriotic pride when we look at certain foreign division names like *Skanderbeg*, *Charlemagne*, *Langemarck*, and *Maria-Theresia* – just to name a few. On some foreign volunteer recruitment posters, one would read “*Auch du!*” or “You too!” which made the non-German aware that he was more than welcome to join this powerful force and that he was part of this new elite. But the reality was sometimes not what the foreign volunteer expected from this elite army. They all had to fight for Germany - which was obvious - but some of these foreign units were used and abused by their German superiors during training and in battle, while other units were praised and treated well. Lots of foreign Waffen SS units were decimated during battle as they were just used as cannon fodder to spare the German Waffen SS units. This is the hard reality when we look at the *Langemarck* or *Galizische Nr 1*, just to name a few. However, many of the foreign units and divisions showed their capability and courage to fight on the battlefield and therefore earned the greatest respect from the German divisions/command. Other units/divisions were poorly trained – due to the progression of the war and the lack of training resources near the end. Those units ceased to exist due to surrender to the Allies or Soviets or because of the annihilation of the unit. Or the units formed by conscripts – the ones that were forced to join the Waffen SS. There were different groups of conscripts of course: first of all, there were Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine personnel who were drafted into the Waffen SS in 1944 – 1945 due to lack of airplanes and warships; then there was Heer, Luftwaffe, and Kriegsmarine personnel whose loyalty was questioned. They were not technically drafted by the Waffen SS but were merely “offered membership” and warned of “dire consequences” should they refuse. Other conscripts came from all layers of the population – especially the ones that were found young and fit enough for combat duty. It went actually that far that even prisoners were “offered” membership. This was the case of the grandfather of a good friend of mine. His grandfather was in prison at the end of the war because he was a *Mischling* or crossbreed: half German/Aryan and half Jewish. He was given the option or to fight for the Fatherland or to die in prison. He chose to fight of course.

Some of the conscripts actually were pretty successful in battle because they wanted to fight for the Fatherland, knowing that there was no other option. Then there were the ones that were in the Waffen SS against their will. Surrender, desertion, mutiny, or annihilation in combat were the only options they had. Lots of them died on the field of honor... According to Rüdiger Overmans - a German military historian specializing in WWII - 314,000 Waffen SS soldiers died in total, not counting the foreign volunteers. It is estimated that a total of 750,000 Waffen SS soldiers were killed in action, went missing, or were wounded.

Preface

It's not the intention to write about the racial policies of the SS or the full history of the organization as these topics have been touched in many other history books. It's also not the intention to glorify the actions and ideologies of certain individuals, groups, or leaders that were members of the SS, Waffen SS, or the NSDAP (National-Socialist Party). This book is about the stories of the men that once were part of this (political) army during the National-Socialist era in Germany/Europe. To understand the Waffen SS we had a quick look at the organization itself, superficial of course, but enough to understand how and where it all started. We also looked at the volunteer and why he joined the Waffen SS, what motivated him to pick up a rifle to go fight in the East – or on any other front. But that is only the tip of the iceberg! Besides understanding the organization as a whole we also need to understand who the most influential people of the organization - SS and Waffen SS - were. Of course, we can't name them all because the list would be too long so we'll discuss only four of them, four men that most likely had the biggest influence on the creation of the SS and Waffen SS, the shaping of the organization in general, and its future in the Reich.

What were the most crucial or successful engagements and/or battles? During almost six years of war, a lot of battles in which the Waffen SS was involved took place all over the European continent. Hundreds of thousands of young men fell somewhere on the battlefield, in their homeland or in a foreign country. Most of them are still buried in foreign soil. The Wehrmacht had their turning point in Stalingrad during the winter of 1942-1943 where the 6th Army had to surrender to the Soviet Forces. But where did the Waffen SS have their turning point in the war? It can be said that their turning point was also at the Eastern Front, most likely the Battle of Kursk in the summer of 1943. Before the Battle of Kursk, the Waffen SS, together with their Wehrmacht comrades, won the Battle of Kharkov in February-March 1943. Kursk was different though. There they lost almost 50% of their manpower and tanks. The battle of Kursk was most likely the largest tank battle in history. The attack started on July 5 with a German spearhead advancing towards the Soviet lines. The Soviets, who were prepared for the advancing German armies, waited patiently for the Germans to fall into the trap of mines. The fields were covered with anti-tank and anti-personnel mines... The Germans slowly moved forward

towards the Soviet positions losing many men and vehicles. On July 12 the Soviet counterattack started and the Germans were pushed back. This Soviet victory in Kursk cleared the way for the Soviet Armies on the Eastern Front.

Last but not least, and maybe a more delicate matter to discuss are the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by and against the Waffen SS or other components of the German Armed Forces. For many people, it's a topic that is almost "off limits" however the truth needs to be told. None of the veterans interviewed for this book have ever committed any crimes against military personnel or civilians. There are some exceptions, but not limited to, Dirlewanger or Kaminski Brigade members. There's no excuse for their actions and they're not soldier worthy. What they did goes against all codes of military conduct and human rights. However, there were also Allied and Russian soldiers that had their fair share of war crimes and crimes against humanity but people don't like to talk about that!

Engagement at the front

Most of the Waffen SS men were volunteers but there were also the ones that were forced to join the ranks of the Waffen SS – the conscripts. Besides having Germans in their ranks, the majority of volunteers came from many other European countries and Russia. Some of them even from the US. It's safe to say that the Waffen SS was the first modern European Army in the history of Europe. When the war was raging on different fronts, the need for more troops was an absolute necessity. The strict recruiting policies of the Waffen SS changed drastically so that people that were "not matching" the profile of the perfect Aryan could be recruited into the ranks of the Waffen SS. Joining the Waffen SS were Belgians, Dutch, Norwegians, Finns, Romanians, Albanians, French, Russians, Estonians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Italians, etc. Many different nationalities under one organization forming one army!

The Waffen SS was engaged on all fronts in Europe and Russia. It grew from only 3 regiments into 38 divisions fighting alongside the Wehrmacht. The Waffen SS were part of Hitler's armies that crushed Europe in 1939-1940 (in 1940 they were renamed Waffen SS as before that they were the SS-VT) and which fought to the bitter end of the Reich in 1945. The Waffen SS was proven to be an efficient fighting machine as its soldiers fought with passion and dedication. Their honor was their loyalty and this was also shown in battle. Leon Degrelle, [Standartenführer](#) of the 28 SS-Freiwilligen Grenadier Division Wallonien, said once in an interview that the Waffen SS was the first European army in

history.

When we talk about the most crucial/successful battles of the SS we obviously talk about the Waffen SS. I'm sure there are a lot more battles where the Waffen SS was involved in, however, the list would be too long. The following list will give you an idea of the engagements of the different units and divisions on different fronts. Note how the Wehrmacht and the Waffen SS fought side by side.

1939-1940: Early SS units fought alongside the Wehrmacht during the Polish campaign and Fall Gelb – the invasion of France and the low countries. The first SS units were the *Leibstandarte, Germania, Der Führer, Deutschland, and Totenkopf*.

July 1940: Hitler renames the SS-VT to the Waffen SS

On the morning of April 13, 1941, German units took their positions south of Serbian capital Belgrade. They were led by Generaloberst von Kleist. The SS Division *Das Reich* along with Wehrmacht units participated in the battle, which took place on April 12 in the town that had been conquered north of the River Danube.

April 15, 1941, motorized Wehrmacht units and the SS Division *LAH – Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* - fought against British troops in Northern Greece and made them move back towards the south. The German troops then conquered Ptolemaios and Kozan.

November 27, 1941, the Red Army (37th Army) started a counter-attack on the 1st Panzer Army in Rostov and forced them out of the city. The 1st Panzer Army – which included the *LAH* – had to retreat to the River Mius and Taganrog.

December 3, 1941, the SS Division *Das Reich* was on the Moscow front and had a hard time fighting and pushing back the Red Army. In fact, the division was not successful and was pulled out of the battle because of massive losses caused by the fierce Red Army counterattack. The division was decimated during this engagement at the front.

January 28, 1942, the 4th SS Police Division occupied 58 bunkers in the Leningrad area. The division saw heavy combat in the Wolchow area around Leningrad and was reduced to a Kampfgruppe in March.

February 10, 1942, the SS Legion *Flandern* beat back the Red Army offensive on the Leningrad – Wolchow front which had started already in January. The Russians attempted to break through the German lines but were unsuccessful.

August 7, 1942, the SS Panzer Abteilung 5 crossed the Kuban bridgehead and the Kropotkin-Armavir railway was crossed resulting in the capture of several freight trains. A little while later all Soviet forces were gone from the Kuban River area.

October 7, 1942, Wehrmacht units and the SS Division *Wiking* started to attack enemy positions south of Terek, near the town of Malgobek. In difficult weather conditions, they fought to keep control over the oil areas that were in this region.

8-9 February 1943, the *LAH's* SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 1 under SS-Sturmbannführer Fritz Witt, fighting alongside SS-Sturmbannführer Max Wünsche's I/SS-Panzer-Regiment 1, fought a bitter delaying action near the town of Merefá, halting a major Soviet attack.

The division fought in many desperate defensive battles over the next few weeks, gradually being pushed back into the city of Kharkov itself.

February 14, 1943: heavy battles east and north of Kharkov. Wehrmacht motorized units and the SS Panzer Corps with the SS Divisions *LAH* and *Das Reich* broke through the Red Army defense. In February 1943 they saw heavy action between the Don River estuary and Kursk.

February 15, 1943, the SS Panzer Corps withdrew from Kharkov in spite of orders from Hitler "...that the city was to be held to the last." SS General Paul Hausser, the corps commander realized that the order to hold Kharkov was impossible and requested permission to withdraw. This was refused by General Lanz. Under pressure from encircling Russian forces outside and from partisans inside the city, Hausser disobeyed the order and extricated his troops, thereby saving thousands of German soldiers and preserved the SS Panzer Corps as a fighting unit. Note: Paul Hausser was ordered by Hitler to stay and hold the city of Kharkov at all costs. As quickly as Hausser received that order, he ordered a tactical withdrawal of the SS Panzerkorps from the city, being the first SS General to disobey an order from Hitler in the field.

February 26, 1943, SS-[Obergruppenführer](#) Theodor Eicke was killed in action during a reconnaissance flight at the initial stage of the 3rd Battle of Kharkov. His plane was shot down by Soviet Forces.

March 11, 1943, the SS Divisions *LAH*, *Das Reich* and a part of the division *Totenkopf* experienced heavy fighting in the Kharkov area. Two Red Army regiments were destroyed during an attack and the enemy was driven out of town during fierce street fights.

March 13, 1943, heavy fighting took place in the Kharkov main railway station. The 1st SS Division *LAH* and the 2nd SS Division *Das Reich* participated in these battles and the Red Army's resistance was suppressed.

March 15, 1943, SS Divisions faced difficult battles that lasted for several days. Kharkov was surrounded and the town was attacked from the north and from the east.

March 16, 1943, strong and determined units of the Red Army began their attack southeast of Kharkov. The remainder of the SS Divisions were formed into battle groups. The most outstanding units in battle were the 3rd SS Regiment *Deutschland - Kampfgruppe Harmel* - and the 5th SS Regiment *Thule - Kampfgruppe Baum*.

March 19, 1943, the 1st SS Division *LAH* and the 3rd SS Division *Totenkopf* battle groups made a surprise attack on Belgorod under the command of Peiper and Bochmann.

March 20, 1943, several Wehrmacht units and the SS Panzer Corps (1st, 2nd, 3rd Division) started their counterattack to Kharkov and Belgorod in the area between Donets and Dnepr. The land forces were led by Generalfeldmarschall von Manstein and the air force was led by Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen.

July 5, 1943, is a turning point for the Waffen SS. The battle of Kursk was lost by the Waffen SS and the Wehrmacht. The II SS Panzer Corps (*LAH*, *Das Reich*, *Totenkopf*) and the *Wiking* Division were engaged in the severe battles in and around Kursk. The battle

ended on August 23 and the Germans lost almost 50% of their manpower and tanks.

July 12, 1943, advancing Soviet tank forces slammed into the *Totenkopf* near Andreevka. In the ensuing battle, both the advancing Soviets and the defending Germans suffered heavy armor losses. Only the arrival of the *Totenkopf* Tiger company averted defeat. After several weeks of heavy fighting, the Operation was called off and *Totenkopf*, suffering from heavy losses in the battle, was switched to defensive operations

September 12, 1943, a special SS unit, who were led by SS-Hauptsturmführer Otto Skorzeny, released the imprisoned Duce in Italy. This action is better known as Operation Oak or *Unternehmen Eiche*. During this action, not a single shot was fired and Mussolini was escorted to German-occupied territory.

December 6, 1943, the SS Division *Wiking* stopped enemy attacks in the Cherkassy area.

January 18, 1944, the SS Division *Wiking* and *Wallonien* began to break out of the Korsun - Cherkassy pocket. The breakout was made possible by the *Wallonien* and the most important assignment: keeping the pocket open and securing the back of outgoing units. Advancing through *Hell's Gate*, the *Wallonien* came under heavy enemy fire with little or no cover. Of the brigade's 2,000 men, only 632 survived. Leon Degrelle, who took command of the *Wallonien*, was awarded the Knight's Cross for this action.

June 28, 1944, the SS Division *Hohenstaufen* was in action along the Odon River (Normandy), and the following day it fought fiercely against the British troops southwest of Caen. The battle for the small town was a bitter one, but the Germans were unable to hold out and it eventually fell to the Allied troops.

June 29, 1944, the Allied front was beaten almost 25 kilometers back in Normandy. Rough battles took place southwest of Caen and the 12th SS Division *Hitlerjugend* suffered heavy losses.

July 21, 1944, the SS Division *Reichsführer SS*, led by SS-Gruppenführer Simon, stood out during the severe battles on the coast of Liguria in Northern Italy.

27 July 1944 SS Division *Nordland* fought alongside Sturmbrigade *Langemarck* and Kampfgruppe *Strachwitz* from the *Grossdeutschland* Division to keep control of Orphanage Hill. Despite the death of the *Nordland*'s commander, SS-Gruppenführer Fritz Scholz, who was killed in the fighting, and the subsequent deaths of the commanders of *Norge* and *Danmark* regiments, the division grimly held onto Orphanage hill.

July 29, 1944, the 17th SS Division *Götz von Berlichingen* stood out during rough battles near Saint-Lô (France). The division was led by SS-Standartenführer Baum after its initial leader SS-Brigadeführer Ostendorff was wounded.

August 1, 1944, rough battles near Narva took place. The Red Army great offensive was stopped by the III SS Panzer Corps, which included the 11th SS Division *Nordland*, the 23rd SS Division *Nederland*, and the 20th Estonian SS Division.

August 22, 1944, the SS Brigade *Wallonie* fought severe battles on the Tartu front, led by SS-Sturmbannführer Degrelle.

September 19, 1944, the battle of the Hürtgenwald begins. The majority of the troops were from the Wehrmacht however there were different SS soldiers that participated in this battle. The battle ended on December 16 when Operation *Wacht am Rhein* started which is better known as the Battle of the Bulge.

September 25, 1944, several Wehrmacht units and the III SS Panzer Corps with the SS Division *Nordland* and the SS Division *Nederland* successfully beat back the Red Army offensive south of Riga.

September 27, 1944, the 1st British Airborne Division's resistance was broken near Arnhem. During a ten-day rough battle, the II SS Panzer Corps, the 9th SS Division *Hohenstaufen*, and the 10th SS Division *Fruntsberg* decimated the enemy forces. The units were led by SS-Obergruppenführer Bittrich.

October 1, 1944, several Waffen SS units saw heavy action near Warsaw since the end of August, especially *Dirlewanger* and *Kaminski* who were sent to "annihilate" all resistance. The actions committed by *Dirlewanger* and *Kaminski* were a black mark on the history of the Waffen SS. The Germans lost thousands of men during the Siege of Warsaw.

November 30, 1944, the III SS Panzer Corps kept their positions in Kurland; the units were led by Generaloberst Schöder. The Red Army sent a massive force to Kurland in the hope to crush the German troops. In the battles that lasted from November 19 to 25, the Red Army did not manage to break through the German resistance.

December 14, 1944, the Red Army massive assaults on the German defense lines were beaten back by Waffen SS units north and northeast of Budapest.

December 15, 1944, the SS Division *Götz von Berlichingen* pushed back the US Troops attacks between Saargemünd and Bitsch.

December 18, 1944, the SS Divisions *Hohenstaufen* and *Das Reich* were fighting in the dense forests between Malmedy and St. Vith. The defenses held and St. Vith only fell to the Germans when the LXVI Corps (18th and 62nd Divisions) attacked from the east and *Hohenstaufen* and the Führer Escort Brigade (*Führerbegleitbrigade*) came in from the north. The fighting followed around Vielsalm, and *Hohenstaufen* was forced back, leaving the St. Vith/Laroche road clear.

17 January 1945 SS Divisions *Totenkopf*, and *Wiking* launched *Operation Konrad III* in Budapest aimed at encircling ten Soviet divisions; the outnumbered German forces could not achieve their goal, despite tearing a 15-mile hole in the Soviet line. Although they had been on the verge of rescuing the 45,000 trapped Germans of IX Waffen-Gebirgskorps der SS, the encircled troops could not be reached and capitulated in early February.

February 9, 1945, the IX SS Mountain Corps, the SS Division *Florian Geyer* and the SS Division *Maria Theresia* stopped the Red Army attacks in the siege of Budapest however by February 13 these SS Divisions were almost completely wiped out by the Red Army. The Siege of Budapest can easily be called the Stalingrad of the Waffen SS.

March 6, 1945, severe battles in Pomerania took place. The 11th Panzer Army, which included the 4th, 10th, 11th, 15th, 23rd, 27th, 28th, and 33rd SS Divisions, stopped the Red

Army attack north of Stargard, northeast of Gollnow, and near Plahte.

April 16, 1945, the SS Division *Nordland* was ordered back into the line east of Berlin. Despite recent replenishment, the division was still grossly under strength and, with the exception of the French and Spanish, many of the new recruits had little, if any, combat experience. Throughout the 17th to the 20th of April, the division was involved in constant combat all along its front, pushing the division back into the city itself. By the 22nd, the *Nordland* had been pushed back to the Tiergarten in the center of the city. During the next few days, the division ceased to exist as a combat unit.

April 28, 1945, the Russians started a major offensive in Berlin and had to face the French SS Sturmbataillon *Charlemagne*. In East Berlin, the remaining 400 men were attached to the 11th SS Panzer-Grenadier Division *Nordland*. They fought with undeniable heroism and terrible losses, 30 Russian tanks were destroyed at the very beginning of the battle. Street fighting raged and its strength had been reduced to only 120 men. Every street and house were hotly contested by French SS men. By 29 April, 60 more Russian tanks had been knockout. Such was the courage of the *Charlemagne*. The SS *Charlemagne* was the last to defend the [Führerbunker](#) in Berlin, remaining there until May 2

May 4th, 1945 the remains of the 38th SS Division Nibelungen managed to regroup and established another defensive line, this time to the west of Oberwössen. In more fierce fighting here, the 38th managed to push back an American attack into the City from the east, and then from the northwest. The 38th Division managed to put up determined resistance even in this, its last hours.

These are just a grasp of the most crucial/successful battles of the Waffen SS. The “successful” battles always came with a price to pay, a very heavy price. The loss of men and equipment goes beyond imagination. Is it actually possible to talk about successful battles knowing that so many men lost their lives? An old friend and Waffen SS veteran told me once that they were fighting in a *Kessel* or cauldron on the Eastern front. They started the battle with over 700 soldiers but by the time the fight was over only 50 of them survived. The toll paid with human lives was extremely high on both sides. The conquest of a small piece of land of a square kilometer was paid with blood, lots of blood. The horror of the war is something that we can't understand and even all the Waffen SS veterans that I know – or knew – told me that the horrors of war are still giving them sleepless nights even after 70 years! One of them stated that he could still hear the cries of the Russians soldiers in their burning tank...which was hit by an anti-tank projectile. Let us all hope that all the victims of war have found their eternal peace.

War crimes and crimes against humanity

When we talk about war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the SS or Waffen SS we immediately think about the concentration camps, the labor camps, the extermination camps, and the *Einsatzgruppen* and *SS Sonderkommandos*. Just to be clear, the Waffen SS were not the camp guards! We all know what happened in the camps or in the field – no explanation needed. Millions of dead remind us! What a lot of people forget is that not all the Waffen SS members committed war crimes or crimes against humanity, and some US POWs were pleasantly surprised by how well they were treated by members of the Waffen SS. The following is a quote from Waffen SS veteran Hans Schmidt:

“I remember well when in January of 1945 we sat together with ten captured Americans after a fierce battle, and the GIs were genuinely surprised that we treated them almost as buddies, without rancor. If you want to know why I can tell you. We had not suffered from years of anti-enemy hate propaganda, as was the case with American and British soldiers whose basic sense of chivalry had often (but not always) been dulled by watching too many anti-German war movies. Then there are the shooting of German POWs immediately after a firefight. A perusal of American World War II literature indicates that such incidents were much more common than is generally admitted, and more often than not, such transgressions against the laws of war and chivalry are often or usually excused, “because the GIs got mad at the Germans who had just killed one of their dearest comrades”. In other words, the anger and the war crime following it was both understandable and, ipso facto excusable.”

As we all know it's always that small percentage of people that make an entire group look bad. The Waffen SS was indeed more fanatic than the regular armed forces but that can't be the reason why some of its members committed such horrible crimes.

There are two types of fanaticism that we can talk about: the one seen in battle, which was the passion to fight and to continue at all costs for a free and better Europe; then there's another type of fanaticism, the criminal one, which could be related to National-Socialist indoctrination or to the character of the person that is committing the crimes.

One division – if we can call it a division – was the 36th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS or Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger. Dirlewanger was a division of criminals who showed absolutely no mercy for their victims. The regular army and most of the SS wanted nothing to do with these men. Here's why. To understand the true essence of this unit, we first must get to know its commander Oskar Dirlewanger, who in August 1943 received the Golden German Cross and in October 1944 the Knight's Cross for his actions in Warsaw. Dirlewanger was imprisoned in 1935 for sexual crimes. He was also sentenced for other crimes and he was an alcoholic. After being released he got a job in the Condor Legion to wash his sins with blood, so to speak. In 1940 he received permission to form a small battalion out of German convicts (poachers, thieves, etc). In 1941 he and his punishment unit were in Poland.

From 1942 to 1944 the battalion was expanded first to a brigade and later to a

division. The brigade consisted of German convicts, concentration camp prisoners, and SS army prisoners. Basically, it was a punishment unit and its members got a chance to redeem their sins with blood. They participated in securing the home front in Russia and were engaged in the fight against partisans. This was because the German command knew how Dirlewanger worked in the field. The brigade's terrifying and extremely cruel actions made other Waffen SS and Wehrmacht units to protest as they were absolutely disgusted how this unit worked. However, since the partisans were cruel with German soldiers and civilians on the front, Dirlewanger's unit was used to battle against them and to balance the situation. The brigade's subunits murdered 1,742 inhabitants of one Belarus village in July 1942. The inhabitants were killed because they were accused of feeding the partisans and giving them information. In the summer of 1944, the 4,000 men of the *SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger* were sent quickly to Warsaw to suppress a revolt. There they performed extremely cruel crimes so that the leaders of the SS and Wehrmacht immediately demanded the unit to retreat. At the end of 1944, the division was active in Slovakia, Hungary and on the River Oder. In February 1945 Dirlewanger was wounded. He died in captivity under mysterious circumstances in June 1945 and was buried in Althaus. The division was annihilated on April 29 - 1945.

Another infamous group or brigade, notorious for war crimes as well was the Kaminski Brigade or SS Sturmbrigade R.O.N.A. (*Russkaya Osvoboditelnaya Narodnaya Armiya*, RONA or Russian National Liberation Army). This brigade was used for anti-partisan actions - just like Dirlewanger - and during the Warsaw uprising the brigade had no military value as it was more interested in looting, alcohol, and murder. Let me be clear, not only Dirlewanger and Kaminski were responsible for crimes and massacres during WWII. There were several other massacres that caught the attention of the war tribunals and the following is a list of some of the most known massacres committed by the Waffen SS:

- Malmedy Massacre (Belgium)
- Tulle and Oradour-Sur-Glane Massacre (France)
- Distomo Massacre (Greece)
- Ochota Massacre (Poland)
- Marzabotto Massacre (Italy)
- Wola Massacre (Poland)
- Ardenne Abbey Massacre (France)

On the other hand, it needs to be known that some Waffen SS units/divisions – like Nord and Nordland for example - had a clean record but the majority of history books refuse to mention that! After WWII ended, the Waffen SS was condemned at the Nuremberg Trials in 1946 as a criminal organization and found guilty for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Former members of the Waffen SS were executed - without trial - or imprisoned after the war. From personal stories of Waffen SS veterans, we know that Waffen SS prisoners of war were often held in strict confinement and were treated harshly

by the Soviets and Allies. Many foreign volunteers that served in the Waffen SS were also treated severely by their national governments because now they were seen as traitors. Some Waffen SS members were never captured as they fled to non-extraditing countries in Southern Europe or South America. The reason why the Waffen SS was condemned at the Nuremberg Trials was because of numerous high-profile atrocities and their connection to the SS and NSDAP. As a result, Waffen SS veterans were generally denied the rights and benefits granted to other WWII German veterans. Only those who were conscripted into the Waffen SS - basically all the conscripts starting from 1943 - were exempt from the Nuremberg Trials' outcome about the Waffen SS. Until today there have been numerous attempts to rehabilitate the image of the Waffen SS veterans, both through legislation and in published works. These efforts have largely failed and to this day the stigma on veterans from the Waffen SS, and in some cases for their families as well, remains.

War crimes against the Waffen SS and other Allied/Soviet war crimes

We have to be honest with ourselves and we have to face the fact that not only the Waffen SS committed war crimes but war crimes were also committed against them and the Wehrmacht by the Allies and Soviets. The reason why is because the Allies feared that the SS would continue to offer armed underground resistance to the occupational authorities, therefore they determined to thoroughly disband and discredit this able military force before the eyes of not only the world but of the German people as well. Consequently, the members of the SS received the most brutal treatment at the hands of the Allied forces, during and after the war. The truth of the matter is that the Waffen SS was no more criminal than any other fighting unit, Allied OR Axis, and the treatment of its members received at the hands of the Allies was unjust and often criminal. Since SS members were stationed at concentration camps as guards, the allies took advantage of this fact and used it to condemn the members of the SS as a whole. Of course, it should go without saying that simply because someone was a guard at a camp does not mean he or she was a criminal. (2)

The system that was set up to bring the Waffen SS “criminals” to trial was not a true application of justice, but rather one that was heavily biased in favor of the victorious. To be honest the Nuremberg Trials didn't treat all sides equally and it seemed that it was just set up to punish the Germans in general and not all those who had committed reprehensible acts during the war. Given that the charges were created after the crimes, it is suspicious that none of the questionable actions undertaken by the Allies were brought up. War crimes had been committed by the components of the German Armed Forces, there's absolutely no denial about that, however many crimes, just as terrible as theirs, went unpunished because they were committed by the winning side. The following is an extract from a book called “Signal Officers of the Waffen SS”. The report below is a translation of the report that *Untersturmführer* Willie Köhler, from the *Totenkopf Nachrichten Abteilung*, wrote:

“What took place on the next morning was unbelievable: We were ordered to

assemble in marching groups of 500 men. In front and behind each group was a tank. These Americans were not soldiers, but wild animals, such as we had never seen throughout the entire war. Soon after we set out, we heard wild shooting to our front and rear. An old grey-haired mother appeared in front of our marching group who wanted to say goodbye to her son. He was an older Wehrmacht officer. I will never forget. While still in the embrace of her son she was shot and fell to the ground dead. We stumbled over her. Our soldiers wailed with pain or rage. Generally, we all had the thought that we should try to escape.

The shooting of defenseless prisoners must have given them pleasure. The Americans had betrayed us! They were marching us to the Russians. The marching tempo was set by the tanks. Many stumbled and fell. A scream to the left or right after a shot from a pistol or sub-machinegun was fired at us. Those that could march no further were shot without mercy. Behind each marching group was an American soldier running and shouting and savagely firing at these poor comrades. We were approaching insanity and words cannot properly describe our condition. One thing stood firm and I give my word as a combat soldier: Never at any time had German soldiers treated defenseless prisoners in such a dastardly and mean manner. We had expected this type of treatment from the Russians, whom we had been fleeing, but not from the Americans. I will never forget this criminal treatment of defenseless prisoners.”

The next quote is from page 69 of “From the Arctic Circle to the Don River: SS Regiment Thule, 1940-1943” by Richard Landwehr:

“The American Army officers then conferred with the Red Army commissar and soon several GIs jumped to the top of the tanks with automatic weapons in their hands. Then, without issuing any warnings whatsoever, they opened fire on the sitting or prone POWs. It was a complete slaughter. Within seconds scores of the captured Waffen SS men had been murdered and those only wounded were quickly finished off. Soon the filthy job was done and the survivors, those that remained standing, were forced to move on under the joint U.S.-Soviet escort. Anyone who staggered, fell or stepped out of line was now instantly executed. It is now known that about 400 Totenkopf POWs were killed without warning by their American captors during the “death march” (to Russian captivity).”

The following depicts how some Soviet units treated their German POWs. In April 1944 some 34 German soldiers of 9th SS-Panzer-Division “Hohenstaufen” were captured by the Soviets in the Ukrainian village of Kalasantovka. These POWs were all killed and the mutilated bodies were found by their comrades during the German counter-attack on the nearby town of Ternopil. A German eyewitness recounts:

“That’s not the way soldiers are supposed to act. The hands and the feet of the dead were bound with the ropes of their own tent pieces. Partially the trousers

were pulled down and genitals severed. With some the eyes were stabbed, ears and tongue cut off. Furthermore, their own bayonet was rammed into the stomach from the downside. Dog tags and other ID were removed to avoid identification of the dead.”

Fortunately, most of them had their last names sewn on the inside of their uniform pieces so that a list of the victims could be compiled. However, this list was lost in time so that these 34 soldiers are considered officially as “Missing in Action”. The following is just a small list of known massacres committed by the Allies and Soviets against German soldiers:

- Biscari Massacre, Italy
- Operation Teardrop
- Dachau POW executions
- Adouville-le-Hubert, France
- Canicatti massacre, Italy
- Saint-Julien-de-Crempse, France
- Rheinwiesenlager POW camp
- Kautla massacre, Estonia
- Kalasantovka, Ukraine
- Przyszwice massacre, Poland

The difference between the Allied and Soviet war crimes and the German war crimes is that the majority of the Allies and the Soviet soldiers that committed war crimes never stood trial for what they have done. The Allies and Soviets were also responsible for thousands of deaths after the German surrender. Besides the casualties from massacres, the Allies and Soviets were also responsible for mass rapes and bombings of several German cities - Dresden, Hamburg, etc - killing thousands of women and children. Some people justify these actions stating that the Germans did the same during the Battle of Britain in 1940. But mostly only the Germans stood trial in the years after the war for what happened during the war. Why most of the Allies and Soviets never stood trial for war crimes is still unclear. However, there were Allied soldiers convicted and sentenced for the crimes they had committed during and after the war. For example, the soldiers interred in Plot E at the Oise Aisne American Cemetery in Northern France were tried for rape, murder, and in one case, desertion. After being convicted in the U.S. and court-martial held in Europe, the men were dishonorably discharged and executed via hanging or firing squad. In many cases, the men who were buried in Plot E were initially buried close to the site of their execution. Those bodies were later exhumed and moved to Oise Aisne in 1949 when the “*plot of shame*” was established. Plot E has been referred to as an anti-memorial.

No US flag is permitted to fly over the plot and the graves themselves, small in-ground stones the size of index cards, have no names; they are only differentiated by numbers. Even underground they are set apart with each body buried in Plot E positioned with its back to the main cemetery. (3)

The events previously discussed must be understood in their proper historical context – chiefly as the excess of individual soldiers fighting an aggressor nation. Crimes on one side do not excuse crimes on the other. All victims are equal in death.

What happened in KZ Dachau after the liberation...?

First, we need a little bit of history about Dachau. Dachau was a concentration camp or KZ located in the State of Bavaria at about 15 km from Munich. The camp was originally the Dachau Royal Gunpowder and Munitions Factory, which had been built in 1915 while World War I was in progress. The camp opened in 1933 and it was one of the first concentration camps in the Reich. The camp was a forced labor camp and it held prisoners of all sorts: Germans, Austrians, people from occupied territories, etc. Most of them were political prisoners but there were also a lot of Jews interned at the camp. It was after the passing of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 that Jehovah's Witnesses and homosexuals were imprisoned in the camp as well. In June 1936, when it was decided to rebuild the concentration camp on the same site, they also made the decision to enlarge the SS training camp and garrison that had been established on the factory grounds. On July 2, 1936, construction began of an enlarged SS camp with the use of prison labor. The SS camp was to be four times the size of the concentration camp, and some of the existing buildings of the former factory would be used. By 1938, the SS camp was like a small town with stores, a movie theater, a post office, restaurants, a community center, a triangular-shaped swimming pool, and an enormous area of barracks for the thousands of soldiers who were stationed there. There was also a military hospital for SS soldiers. Later, during the war, not only Jews and political prisoners were imprisoned at Dachau but also Russian POW. Even if Dachau was "only" a forced labor camp, a lot of people died there. Life at the camp was far from easy and the conditions were very harsh. By entering the camp, as a prisoner, one would be reminded that "Labour will set you free" or "*Arbeit macht frei*", which was posted at the main entrance gate. A reminder to whoever passed through the gates that this was not a vacation camp but a camp that was ruled with the iron fist! During the course of the war, lots of prisoners were sent to Dachau and tens of thousands never left the place again. It was until late April 1945 that prisoners were still sent to the camp. Then, at the end of April, the camp was liberated by the US Armed Forces. It was on April 29 – 1945 that the camp was liberated but it was also the day that

several Waffen SS soldiers – who already had surrendered – were murdered by US troops. In 1989, Lt. Col. Sparks wrote an account of the role of the 45th Infantry Division in the liberation of Dachau. His description of what happened at the wall is as follows:

“As I watched, about fifty German troops were brought in from various directions. A machine gun squad from Company I was guarding the prisoners. After watching for a few minutes, I started for the confinement area (the concentration camp), after taking directions from one of my soldiers. After I had walked away for a short distance, I heard the machine gun guarding the prisoners open fire. I immediately ran back to the gun and kicked the gunner off the gun with my boot. I then grabbed him by the collar and said: “What the hell are you doing?” He was a young private about 19 years old (Private William C. Curtin) and was crying hysterically. His reply to me was: “Colonel, they were trying to get away.” I doubt that they were, but in any event, he killed about twelve of the prisoners and wounded several more. I placed a non-com on the gun and headed towards the confinement area.”

In his 1989 account of the liberation of Dachau, Sparks wrote the following regarding the number of SS soldiers who were killed in the Dachau massacre:

“It was the foregoing incident which has given rise to wild claims in various publications that most or all of the German prisoners captured at Dachau were executed. Nothing could be further from the truth. The total number of German guards killed at Dachau during that day most certainly did not exceed fifty, with thirty probably being a more accurate figure.”

According to Flint Whitlock, historian for the 45th Thunderbird Division, the men of the 45th Infantry Division had been warned about the danger posed by German POWs by General George S. Patton, Jr., the Commander of the US Seventh Army, on June 27, 1943, just before their invasion of Sicily. Whitlock wrote:

“Patton cautioned the men to watch out for dirty tricks when it seemed a group of enemy soldiers wanted to surrender. A favorite tactic, the general said, was for a small group to suddenly drop their weapons and raise their hands or wave a white flag. When unsuspecting Americans moved into the open to take the enemy prisoner, the ‘surrendering’ troops would hit the dirt and their comrades, lying in wait, would spring up and mow down the exposed Americans. Patton warned the Thunderbirds to be on their guard for this sort of treachery and to show no mercy if the Germans or Italians attempted this trick. His words would have fateful repercussions.”

The “fateful repercussions,” that Whitlock was referring to, was the incident that happened at the liberation of Dachau when a young soldier of the 45th Infantry Division of the US Seventh Army opened fire on a group of Waffen SS soldiers who had surrendered. He claimed that the surrendered soldiers had moved forward. As the 45th Infantry Division advanced toward Dachau, with orders to liberate the infamous

Concentration Camp, where it was common knowledge that Jews were being exterminated in gas chambers by the Nazis, the American soldiers had no prior information about the existence of the *SS-Übungslager*, which was the equivalent of an Army post, located right next to the Dachau prison compound. The gas chambers were just outside the barbed wire fence that separated the prison compound from the SS training camp. The men of the 45th Division were not expecting to find a garrison of soldiers, much less Waffen SS soldiers. For the Americans, the SS had a reputation as the evillest of the evil German soldiers. Part of the bad reputation of the Waffen SS stemmed from the fact that the guards in all the Nazi concentration camps were soldiers in the infamous *SS-Totenkopfverbände* or the “Death’s Head” unit of the SS. The regular Germany Army was the Wehrmacht. (4)

Conclusion

History books cannot deny that the Waffen SS was the most dedicated, passionate, and most disciplined Army of WWII. Even high ranked Allied soldiers admitted that it was the best army ever and that they admired their passion to fight. Its members were loyal to the cause – primarily fighting communism for a free and better Europe - and to their leader(s), and many of them concluded the war by fighting until the last bullet and then opting to commit suicide rather than being captured by the Allies or Russians. It certainly was the most fanatic of all Armies, wearing the two lightning bolts and the skull on their uniform as a proof of their belief in the final victory and loyalty until death. For some of them - unfortunately - it also represented their actions towards prisoners or civilians which resulted in horrendous crimes. Not all members of the Waffen SS were war criminals though and I hope that – after reading the Waffen SS veteran stories in this book – the point of view about the common Waffen SS soldier will change. Some of the Waffen

SS soldiers showed more humanity and compassion than their Allied or Soviet opponents. To this day the actions of the Waffen SS and its former members are vilified for ultimately being a part of the larger structure of the political *Allgemeine SS*, regardless of the fact that the Waffen SS was a front-line combat organization.

As a final note, it must be known that it is impossible to find a veteran from each Waffen SS Division. Today many of these veterans are long gone and some of the divisions were completely destroyed at the end of the war.



The point of view of Waffen SS [Standartenführer](#) Leon Degrelle.

It is important to know how certain Waffen SS members felt about the Waffen SS and the position of Germany during WWII. The following is an essay written by SS [Standartenführer](#) Leon Degrelle (From The Journal of Historical Review, Winter 1982-83 (Vol. 3, No. 4). This essay by Leon Degrelle (1906-1994), who was with the 28th SS Volunteer Grenadier Division Wallonien, was first presented at the Fourth IHR Conference in Chicago- Sept. 1982). Lacking any previous military service, he volunteered to join as a low ranking private in the regular Army or *Heer*, rejecting a direct promotion to an officer's rank from Hitler himself! Degrelle, who joined the Waffen SS after serving time in the Heer, was a highly decorated Waffen SS soldier who worked his way up to the top by showing his courage during many battles.

“Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am asked to talk to you about the great unknown of World War Two: the Waffen SS. It is somewhat amazing that the organization which was both political and military and which during World War Two united more than one million fighting volunteers should still be officially ignored. Why? Why is it that the official record still virtually ignores this extraordinary army of volunteers? An army which was at the vortex of the most gigantic

struggle, affecting the entire world. The answer may well be found in the fact that the most striking feature of the Waffen SS was that it was composed of volunteers from some thirty different countries. What cause gathered them and why did they volunteer their lives? Was it a German phenomenon? In the beginning, yes. Initially, the Waffen SS amounted to less than two hundred members. It grew consistently until 1940 when it evolved into a second phase: the Germanic Waffen SS. In addition to Germans from Germany, northwestern Europeans and descendants of Germans from all across Europe enlisted. Then, in 1941 during the great clash with the Soviet Union, rose the European Waffen SS. Young men from the most distant countries fought together on the Russian front. No one knew anything about the Waffen SS for most of the years preceding the war. The Germans themselves took some time to recognize the distinctiveness of the Waffen SS.

Hitler rose to the chancellorship democratically, winning at the ballot box. He ran electoral campaigns like any other politician. He addressed meetings, advertised on billboards, his message attracted capacity audiences. More and more people liked what he had to say and more and more people voted members of his party into congress. Hitler did not come to power by force but was duly elected by the people and duly installed as Chancellor by the President of Germany, General von Hindenburg. His government was legitimate and democratic. In fact, only two of his followers were included in the Cabinet. Later he succeeded always through the electoral process in increasing his majority. When some elections gave him up to 90% of the vote, Hitler earned every vote on his own merit. During his campaigns, Hitler faced formidable enemies: the power establishment who had no qualms whatsoever in tampering with the electoral process. He had to face the Weimar establishment and its well-financed left-wing and liberal parties and a highly organized bloc of six million Communist Party members. Only the most fearless and relentless struggle to convince people to vote for him, enabled Hitler to obtain a democratic majority. In those days the Waffen SS was not even a factor. There was, of course, the SA with some three million men. They were rank and file members of the National Socialist Workers Party but certainly not an army. Their main function was to protect party candidates from Communist violence. And the violence was murderous indeed: more than five hundred National Socialists were murdered by the communists. Thousands were grievously injured.

The SA was a volunteer, non-government organization and as soon as Hitler rose to power, he could no longer avail himself of its help. He had to work within the system he was elected to serve. He came in a state of disadvantage. He had to contend with an entrenched bureaucracy appointed by the old regime. In fact, when the war started in 1939, 70% of German bureaucrats had been appointed by the old regime and did not belong to Hitler's party. Hitler could not count on the support of the Church hierarchy. Both big business and the Communist Party were totally hostile to his programs. On top of all this, extreme poverty existed and six million workers were unemployed. No country in Europe had ever known so many people to be out of work. So here is a man quite isolated. The three million SA party members are not in the government. They vote and help win the elections but they cannot supplant the entrenched bureaucracy in the government posts. The SA also was unable to exert influence on the army, because the top brass,

fearful of competition, was hostile to the SA. This hostility reached such a point that Hitler was faced with a wrenching dilemma. What to do with the millions of followers who helped him to power? He could not abandon them. The army was a highly organized power structure. Although only numbering 100,000 as dictated by the Treaty of Versailles it exerted great influence in the affairs of state. The President of Germany was Field Marshal von Hindenburg. The army was a privileged caste. Almost all the officers belonged to the upper classes of society. It was impossible for Hitler to take on the powerful army frontally. Hitler was elected democratically and he could not do what Stalin did: to have firing squads execute the entire military establishment. Stalin killed thirty thousand high ranking officers. That was Stalin's way to make room for his own trusted commissars. Such drastic methods could not occur in Germany and unlike Stalin, Hitler was surrounded by international enemies. His election had provoked international rage. He had gone to the voters directly without the intermediary of the establishment parties. His party platform included an appeal for racial purity in Germany as well as a return of power to the people. Such tenets so infuriated world Jewry that in 1933 it officially declared war on Germany. Contrary to what one is told Hitler had limited power and was quite alone. How this man ever survived these early years defy comprehension. Only the fact that Hitler was an exceptional genius explains his survival against all odds. Abroad and at home, Hitler had to bend over backward just to demonstrate his good will. But despite all his efforts, Hitler was gradually being driven into a corner. The feud between the SA and the army was coming to a head. His old comrade, Ernst Röhm, Chief of the SA wanted to follow Stalin's example and physically eliminate the army brass. The showdown resulted in the death of Röhm, either by suicide or murder, and many of his assistants, with the army picking up the pieces and putting the SA back in its place. At this time the only SS to be found in Germany was in Chancellor Hitler's personal guard: one hundred eighty men in all. They were young men of exceptional qualities but without any political role. Their duties consisted of guarding the Chancellery and presenting arms to visiting dignitaries. It was from this minuscule group of 180 men that a few years later would spring an army of a million soldiers. An army of unprecedented valor extending its call throughout Europe. After Hitler was compelled to acknowledge the superiority of the army, he realized that the brass would never support his revolutionary social programs. It was an army of aristocrats.

Hitler was a man of the people, a man who succeeded in wiping out unemployment, a feat unsurpassed to this day. Within two years he gave work to six million Germans and got rid of rampant poverty. In five years, the German worker doubled his income without inflation. Hundreds of thousands of beautiful homes were built for workers at a minimal cost. Each home had a garden to grow flowers and vegetables. All the factories were provided with sports fields, swimming pools, and attractive and decent workshops. For the first time, paid vacations were created. The communists and capitalists had never offered paid vacations; this was Hitler's creation. He organized the famous "strength through joy" programs which meant that workers could, at affordable prices, board passenger ships and visit any part of the world. All these social improvements did not please the establishment. Big business tycoons and international bankers were worried. But Hitler stood up to them. Business can make profits but only if

people are paid decently and are allowed to live and work in dignity. People, not profits, come first. This was only one of Hitler's reforms. He initiated hundreds of others. He literally rebuilt Germany. In a few years, more than five thousand miles of freeways were built. For the worker, the affordable Volkswagen was created. Any worker could get this car on payment of five marks a week. It was unprecedented in Europe. Thanks to the freeways the worker for the first time could visit any part of Germany whenever they liked. The same programs applied to the farmers and the middle class. Hitler realized that if his social reforms were to proceed free of sabotage, he needed a powerful lever, a lever that commanded respect. Hitler still did not confront the army but skillfully started to build up the SS. He desperately needed the SS because above all Hitler was a political man; to him, the war was the last resort. His aim was to convince people, to obtain their loyalty, particularly the younger generation. He knew that the establishment-minded brass would oppose him at every turn. And he was right. Through the high-ranking officers, the establishment plotted the overthrow of the democratically elected Hitler government. Known as the Munich Plot, the conspirators were detected in time. That was in 1938. On 20 July 1944, Hitler almost lost his life when aristocratic officers planted a time bomb underneath his desk. In order not to alert the army Hitler enlarged the SS into a force responsible for law and order. There was, of course, a German police force but there again Hitler was unsure of their loyalty. The 150,000 police were appointed by the Weimar regime. Hitler needed the SS not only to detect plots but mostly to protect his reforms. As his initial Leibstandarte unit of 180 grew, other regiments were found such as the Deutschland and the Germania.

The army brass did everything to prevent SS recruitment. Hitler bypassed the obstacles by having the interior minister and not the war ministry do the recruiting. The army countered by discouraging the recruitment of men between the ages of 18 and 45. On the ground of national defense, privates were ordered to serve four years, non-commissioned officers twelve and officers twenty-five years. Such orders, it was thought, would stop SS recruitment dead in its tracks. The reverse happened. Thousands of young men rushed to apply, despite the lengthy service, more than could be accepted. The young felt the SS was the only armed force which represented their own ideas. The new formations of young SS captivated public imagination. Clad in smart black uniforms the SS attracted more and more young men. It took two years from 1933 to 1935 and a constant battle of wits with the army to raise a force of 8,000 SS. At the time the name Waffen SS did not even exist. It was not until 1940, after the French campaign, that the SS will be officially named "Waffen SS." In 1935 they were called just SS. However, 8,000 SS did not go far in a country of 80 million people. And Hitler had yet to devise another way to get around the army. He created the Totenkopf guard corps. They were really SS in disguise but their official function was to guard the concentration camps. What were these concentration camps? They were just work camps where intractable communists were put to work. They were well treated because it was thought they would be converted sooner or later to patriotism. There were two concentration camps with a total of three thousand men. Three thousand out of a total of six million card-carrying members of the Communist Party. That represents one per two thousand. Right until the war, there were fewer than ten thousand inmates. So, the Totenkopf ploy produced four regiments. At the

right moment, they will join the SS. The Totenkopf kept a low profile through an elaborate system of recruiting reserves in order to keep its strength inconspicuous. At the beginning of the war, the Totenkopf numbered 40,000 men. They will be sent to 163 separate units. Meanwhile, the initial Leibstandarte regiment reached 2800 and a fourth regiment was formed in Vienna at the time of the Anschluss. The young men who joined the SS were trained like no other army in the world. Military and academic instructions were intensive, but it was the physical training that was the most rigorous. They practice sports with excellence. Each of them would have performed with distinction at the Olympic Games. The extraordinary physical endurance of the SS on the Russian front, which so amazed the world, was due to this intensive training. There was also the ideological training. They were taught why they were fighting, what kind of Germany was being resurrected before their very eyes. They were shown how Germany was being morally united through class reconciliation and physically united through the return of the lost German homelands. They were made aware of their kinship with all the other Germans living in foreign lands, in Poland, Russia, the Sudetenland and other parts of Europe. They were taught that all Germans represented an ethnic unity. Young SS were educated in two military academies, one in Bad Tölz, the other in Braunschweig. These academies were totally different from the grim barracks of the past. Combining aesthetics with the latest technology they were located in the middle of hundreds of acres of beautiful country. Hitler was opposed to any war, particularly in Western Europe. He did not even conceive that the SS could participate in such a war. Above all the SS was a political force. Hitler regarded Western countries as individual cultures which could be federated but certainly not conquered. He felt a conflict within the West would be a no-win civil war. Hitler's conception of Europe then was far ahead of his neighbors. The mentality of 1914-1918, when small countries fought other small countries over bits of real estate, still prevailed in the Europe of 1939. Not so in the case of the Soviet Union where internationalism replaced nationalism. The communists never aimed at serving the interests of Russia. Communism does not limit itself to acquire chunks of territories but aims at total world domination. This is a dramatically new factor. This policy of world conquest is still being carried out today whether in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Africa or Poland. At the time it was an entirely new concept. Alone among all the leaders of the world Hitler saw this concept as an equal threat to all nations. Hitler recalled vividly the havoc the communists unleashed in Germany at the end of World War One. Particularly in Berlin and Bavaria the Communists under foreign orders organized a state within a state and almost took over. For Hitler, everything pointed East. The threat was Communism. Apart from his lack of interest in subjugating Western Europe, Hitler was well aware he could not wage war on two fronts. At this point instead of letting Hitler fight Communism, the Allies made the fateful decision to attack Hitler. The so-called Western Democracies allied themselves with the Soviet Union for the purpose of encircling and destroying the democratic government of Germany. The Treaty of Versailles had already amputated Germany from all sides. It was designed to keep Germany in a state of permanent economic collapse and military impotence. The Allies had ratified a string of treaties with Belgium, the newly created Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, and Rumania to pressure Germany from all sides. Now in the summer of 1939, the governments of Britain and France were secretly

negotiating a full military alliance with the Soviet Union. The talks were held in Moscow and the minutes were signed by Marshal Zhukov. I have these minutes in my possession. They are stupefying. One can read a report guaranteeing Britain and France of Soviet participation against Germany. Upon ratification, the Soviet Union was to provide the Anglo-French forces with the Soviet support of 5500 combat planes immediately plus the back up of the entire Soviet air force. Between 9,000 and 10,000 tanks would also be made available. In return, the Soviet Union demanded the Baltic States and free access to Poland. The plan called for an early joint attack. Germany was still minimally armed at that stage. The French negotiators realized that the 10,000 Soviet tanks would soon destroy the 2000 German tanks but did not see that they would be unlikely to stop at the French border. Likewise, the British government was quite prepared to let the Soviets take over Europe. Facing total encirclement Hitler decided once more to make his own peace with one or the other side of the Soviet-British partnership. He turned to the British and French governments and requested formal peace talks. His quest for peace was answered by an outpouring of insults and denunciations. The international press went on an orgy of hate against Hitler unprecedented in history. It is mind-boggling to re-read these newspapers today. When Hitler made similar peace overtures to Moscow, he was surprised to find the Soviets eager to sign a peace treaty with Germany. In fact, Stalin did not sign a peace treaty for the purpose of peace. He signed to let Europe destroy itself in a war of attrition while giving him the time he needed to build up his military strength. Stalin's real intent is revealed in the minutes of the Soviet High Command, also in my possession. Stalin states his intent to come into the war the moment Hitler and the Western powers have annihilated each other. Stalin had great interest in marking time and letting others fight first. I have read his military plans and I have seen how they were achieved. By 1941 Stalin's ten thousand tanks had increased to 17,999, the next year they would have been 32,000, ten times more than Germany's. The air force would also have been 10 to 1 in Stalin's favor. The very week Stalin signed the peace treaty with Hitler he gave orders to build 96 airfields on the Western Soviet border, 180 were planned for the following year. His strategy was constant: "The more the Western powers fight it out the weaker they will be. The longer I wait the stronger I get." It was under these appalling circumstances that World War Two started. A war which was offered to the Soviets on a silver platter. Aware of Stalin's preparations Hitler knew he would have to face communism sooner rather than later. And to fight communism he had to rely on totally loyal men, men who would fight for an ideology against another ideology. It had always been Hitler's policy to oppose the ideology of class war with an ideology of class cooperation. Hitler had observed that Marxist class war had not brought prosperity to the Russian people. Russian workers were poorly clothed, as they are now, badly housed, badly fed. Goods are always in short supply and to this day, housing in Moscow is as nightmarish as it was before the war. For Hitler, the failure of class war made class cooperation the only just alternative. To make it work Hitler saw to it that one class would not be allowed to abuse the other. It is a fact that the newly rich classes emerging from the industrial revolution had enormously abused their privileges and it was for this reason that the National Socialists were socialists. National Socialism was a popular movement in the truest sense. The great majority of National Socialists were blue collars. 70% of the Hitler Youth were children of blue-collar workers.

Hitler won the elections because the great mass of workers was solidly behind him. One often wonders why six million communists who had voted against Hitler, turned their back on Communism after Hitler had been elected in 1933. There is only one reason: they witnessed and experienced the benefits of class cooperation. Some say they were forced to change; it is not true. Like other loyal Germans, they fought four years on the Russian Front with distinction. The workers never abandoned Hitler, but the upper classes did. Hitler spelled out his formula of class cooperation as the answer to communism with these words: "Class cooperation means that capitalists will never again treat the workers as mere economic components. Money is but one part of our economic life, the workers are more than machines to whom one throws a pay packet every week. The real wealth of Germany is its workers." Hitler replaced gold with work as the foundation of his economy. National Socialism was the exact opposite of Communism. Extraordinary achievements followed Hitler's election. We always hear about Hitler and the camps, Hitler and the Jews, but we never hear about his immense social work. If so, much hatred was generated against Hitler by the international bankers and the servile press it was because of his social work. It is obvious that a genuine popular movement like National Socialism was going to collide with the selfish interest of high finance. Hitler made clear that the control of money did not convey the right of rapacious exploitation of an entire country because there are also people living in the country, millions of them, and these people have the right to live with dignity and without want. What Hitler said and practiced had won over the German youth. It was this social revolution that the SS felt compelled to spread throughout Germany and defend with their lives if need be. The 1939 war in Western Europe defied all reason. It was a civil war among those who should have been united. It was a monstrous stupidity.

The young SS were trained to lead the new National Socialist revolution. In five or ten years they were to replace all those who had been put in office by the former regime. But at the beginning of the war, it was not possible for these young men to stay home. Like the other young men in the country, they had to defend their country and they had to defend it better than the others. The war turned the SS from a home political force to a national army fighting abroad and then to a supranational army. We are now at the beginning of the war in Poland with its far-reaching consequences. Could the war have been avoided? Emphatically yes! Even after it had moved into Poland. The Danzig conflict was inconsequential. The Treaty of Versailles had separated the German city of Danzig from Germany and given it to Poland against the wish of its citizens. This action was so outrageous that it had been condemned all over the world. A large section of Germany was sliced through the middle. To go from Western Prussia to Eastern Prussia one had to travel in a sealed train through Polish territory. The citizens of Danzig had voted 99% to have their city returned to Germany. Their right of self-determination had been consistently ignored. However, the war in Poland started for reasons other than Danzig's self-determination or even Poland's. Poland just a few months before had attacked Czechoslovakia at the same time Hitler had returned the Sudetenland to Germany. The Poles were ready to work with Hitler. If Poland turned against Germany it is because the British government did everything in its power to poison German-Polish relations. Why? Much has to do with a longstanding inferiority complex British ruler have felt towards Europe. This complex has manifested itself in the British Establishment's

obsession in keeping Europe weak through wars and dissension. At the time the British Empire controlled 500 million human beings outside of Europe but somehow it was more preoccupied with its traditional hobby: sowing dissension in Europe. This policy of never allowing the emergence of a strong European country has been the British Establishment's modus operandi for centuries. Whether it was Charles the Fifth of Spain, Louis the Fourteenth or Napoleon of France or William the Second of Germany, the British Establishment never tolerated any unifying power in Europe. Germany never wanted to meddle in British affairs. However, the British Establishment always made it a point to meddle in European affairs, particularly in Central Europe and the Balkans. Hitler's entry into Prague brought the British running to the fray. Prague and Bohemia had been part of Germany for centuries and always within the German sphere of influence. British meddling in this area was totally unjustified. For Germany, the Prague regime represented a grave threat. Benes, Stalin's servile Czech satrap, had been ordered by his Kremlin masters to open his borders to the Communist armies at a moment's notice. Prague was to be the Soviet springboard to Germany. For Hitler, Prague was a watchtower to central Europe and an advance post to delay a Soviet invasion. There were also Prague's historical economic links with Germany. Germany has always had economic links with Central Europe. Rumania, the Balkans, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Yugoslavia have had longstanding complimentary economies with Germany which have functioned to this day. Hitler's European economic policy was based on common sense and realism. And it was Hitler's emerging Central European Common Market rather than concern for Czech freedom that the British Establishment could not tolerate. Yet English people felt great admiration for Hitler. I remember when Lloyd George addressed the German press outside Hitler's home, where he had just been a guest. He stated: "You can thank God you have such a wonderful man as your leader!" Lloyd George, the enemy of Germany during World War One, said that! King Edward the Eighth of England who had just abdicated and was now the Duke of Windsor also came to see Hitler at his Berchtesgaden home, accompanied by his wife, who incidentally had been used to force his abdication. When they returned the Duke sent a wire to Hitler. It read: "What a wonderful day we have spent with your Excellency. Unforgettable!" The Duke reflected what many English people knew, remarking on: "how well off the German workers were." The Duke was telling the truth. The German worker earned twice as much, without inflation, as he did before Hitler and consequently his standard of living was high. Even Churchill, the most fanatic German-hater of them all, had in 1938, a year before the war, sent a letter to Hitler in which he wrote: "If ever Great Britain was plunged into a disaster comparable to the one that afflicted Germany in 1918 I would ask God that He should send us a man with the strength and the character of your Excellency." The London Times reported this extraordinary statement. Friend or foe, all acknowledge that Hitler was a man of exceptional genius. His achievements were the envy of the world. In five short years, he rebuilt a bankrupt nation burdened with millions of unemployed into the strongest economic power in Europe. It was so strong that the small country that was Germany was able to withstand a war against the whole world for six years. Churchill acknowledged that no one in the world could match such a feat. He stated just before the war: "there is no doubt we can work out a peace formula with Hitler." But Churchill received other instructions. The Establishment, fearful that Hitler's successes in

Germany could spread to other countries, was determined to destroy him. It created hatred against Germany across Europe by stirring old grievances. It also exploited the envy some Europeans felt toward Germany. The Germans' high birth rate had made Germany the most populous country in Western Europe. In science and technology, Germany was ahead of both France and Britain. Hitler had built Germany into an economic powerhouse. That was Hitler's crime and the British Establishment opted to destroy Hitler and Germany by any means. The British manipulated the Polish government against Germany. The Poles themselves were more than willing to live in peace with the Germans. Instead, the unfortunate Poles were railroaded into war by the British. One must not forget that one and a half million Germans lived in Poland at the time, at great benefit to the Polish economy. Apart from economic ties with Germany, the Poles saw a chance that with Germany's help they would be able to recover their Polish territories from the Soviet Union, territories they had tried to recover in vain since 1919. In January 1939 Hitler had proposed to Beck, the Polish leader, a compromise to solve the Danzig issue: The Danzigers' vote to return to Germany would be honored and Poland would continue to have free port access and facilities, guaranteed by treaty. The prevailing notion of the day that every country must have a seaport really does not make sense. Switzerland, Hungary and other countries with no seaports manage quite well. Hitler's proposals were based on the principles of self-determination and reciprocity. Even Churchill admitted that such a solution could dispose of the Danzig problem. This admission, however, did not prevent him to send an ultimatum to Germany: withdrawal from Poland or war. The world has recently seen what happened when Israel invaded Lebanon. Heavily populated cities like Tyre and Sidon were destroyed and so was West Beirut. Everybody called for Israel's withdrawal but no one declared war on Israel when it refused to budge. With a little patience, a peaceful solution would have been found, Danzig. Instead, the international press unleashed a massive campaign of outright lies and distortions against Hitler. His proposals were willfully misrepresented by a relentless press onslaught. Of all the crimes of World War Two, one never hears about the wholesale massacres that occurred in Poland just before the war. I have detailed reports in my files documenting the mass slaughter of defenseless Germans in Poland. Thousands of German men, women, and children were massacred in the most horrendous fashion by Press-enraged mobs. The photographs of these massacres are too sickening to look at! Hitler decided to halt the slaughter and he rushed to the rescue. The Polish campaign showed Hitler to be a military genius. History had already started to recognize this most startling of Hitler's characteristics: his rare military genius. All the successful military campaigns of the Third Reich were thought out and directed by Hitler personally, not the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Hitler inspired a number of generals who became his most able executives in later campaigns. In regard to the Polish campaign the General Staff had planned an offensive along the Baltic coastline in order to take Danzig, a plan logistically doomed to failure. Instead, Hitler invented the Blitzkrieg or lightning war and in no time captured Warsaw. The Waffen SS appeared on the Polish Front and its performance amazed the world. The second campaign in France was also swift and humane. The British-French forces had rushed to Holland and Belgium to check the German advance, but they were outwitted and outflanked in Sedan. It was all over in a matter of days. The story goes that Hitler had nothing to do with this operation; that it was

all the work of General von Manstein. That is entirely false. Marshall von Manstein had indeed conceived the idea but when he submitted it to the Joint Chiefs of Staff he was reprimanded, demoted and retired to Dresden. The General Staff had not brought this particular incident to Hitler's attention. On his own, Hitler ran a campaign along the same lines and routed the British-French forces. It was not until March 1940 that von Manstein came into contact with Hitler. Hitler also planned the Balkan and Russian campaigns. On the rare occasions where Hitler allowed the General Staff to have their way, such as in Kursk, the battle was lost. In the 1939 Polish campaign Hitler did not rely on military textbook theories devised fifty years ago, as advocated by the General Staff, but on his own plan of swift, pincer-like encirclement. In eight days, the Polish war was won and over in spite of the fact that Poland is as large as France. The eight-day campaign saw three SS regiments in action: The Leibstandarte, the Deutschland and the Germania. There was also an SS motorbike battalion, a corps of engineers and a transmission unit. In all, it was a comprehensive but small force of 25,000 men. Sepp Dietrich and his Leibstandarte alone had, after bolting out of Silesia, split Poland in half within days. With less than 3,000 men he had defeated a Polish force of 15,000 and taken 10,000 prisoners. Such victories were not achieved without loss. It is hard to imagine that from a total of one million SS, 352,000 were killed in action with 50,000 more missing. It is a grim figure! Four hundred thousand of the finest young men in Europe! Without hesitation, they sacrificed themselves for their beliefs. They knew they had to give an example. They were the first on the front line as a way to defend their country and their ideals. In victory or defeat, the Waffen SS always sought to be the best representatives of their people. The SS was a democratic expression of power: people gathering of their own free will. The consent of the ballot box is not only this; there is consent of the heart and the mind of men. In action, the Waffen SS made a plebiscite: that the German people should be proud of them, should give them their respect and their love. Such high motivation made the volunteers of the Waffen SS the best fighters in the world. The SS had proved themselves in action. They were not empty talking politicians, but they gave their lives, the first to go and fight in an extraordinary spurt of comradeship. This comradeship was one of the most distinctive characteristics of the SS: the SS leader was the comrade of the others. It was on the front lines that the results of the SS physical training could really be noticed. An SS officer had the same rigorous training as the soldiers. Those officers and privates competed in the same sports events, and only the best man won, regardless of rank. This created a real brotherhood which literally energized the entire Waffen SS. Only the teamwork of free men, bonded by a higher ideal could unite Europe. Look at the Common Market of today. It is a failure. There is no unifying ideal. Everything is based on haggling over the price of tomatoes, steel, coal, or booze. Fruitful unions are based on something a little higher than that. The relationship of equality and mutual respect between soldiers and officers was always present. Half of all division commanders were killed in action. Half! There is not an army in the world where this happened. The SS officer always led his troops to battle. I was engaged in seventy-five hand-to-hand combats because as an SS officer I had to be the first to meet the enemy. SS soldiers were not sent to slaughter by behind-the-line officers, they followed their officers with passionate loyalty. Every SS commander knew and taught all his men, and often received unexpected answers. After

breaking out of Cherkasy siege I talked with all my soldiers one-by-one, there were thousands at the time. For two weeks every day from dawn to dusk, I asked them questions and heard their replies. Sometimes it happens that some soldiers, who brag a little, receive medals, while others - heroes - who keep quiet, miss out. I talked to all of them because I wanted to know first-hand what happened, and what they had done. To be just I had to know the truth. It was on this occasion that two of my soldiers suddenly pulled their identity cards from the Belgian Resistance Movement. They had been sent to kill me. At the front line, it is very simple to shoot someone in the back. But the extraordinary SS team spirit had won them over. SS officers could expect the loyalty of their men by their example. The life expectancy of an SS officer at the front was three months. In Estonia I received ten new young officers from Bad Tölz academy one Monday; by Thursday, one was left and he was wounded. In the conventional armies, officers talked at the men, from superior to inferior, and seldom as brothers in combat and brothers in ideology. Thus, by 1939, the Waffen SS had earned general admiration and respect. This gave Hitler the opportunity to call for an increase in their numbers. Instead of regiments, there would be three divisions. Again, the Army brass laid down draconian recruiting conditions: SS could only join for not less than four years of combat duty. The brass felt no one would take such a risk. Again, they guessed wrong. In the month of February 1940 alone, 49,000 joined the SS. From 25,000 in September 1939 there would be 150,000 in May 1940. Thus, from 180 to 8,000 to 25,000 to 150,000 and eventually one million men, all this against all odds. Hitler had no interest whatever in getting involved with the war in France, a war forced on him. The 150,000 SS had to serve under the Army, and they were given the most dangerous and difficult missions. Despite the fact that they were provided with inferior hand-arms and equipment. They had no tanks. In 1940 the Leibstandarte was provided with a few scouting tanks. The SS were given wheels and that's all. But with trucks, motorbikes and varied limited means, they were able to perform amazing feats. The Leibstandarte and Der Führer regiments were sent to Holland under the Leadership of Sepp Dietrich. They had to cross Dutch waterways. The Luftwaffe had dropped parachutists to hold the bridges 120 miles deep in Dutch territory, and it was vital for the SS to reach these bridges with the greatest speed. The Leibstandarte would realize an unprecedented feat in ten days: to advance 120 miles in one day. It was unheard of at the time, and the world was staggered. At that rate, German troops would reach Spain in one week. In one day, the SS had crossed all the Dutch canals on flimsy rubber rafts. Here again, SS losses were heavy. But, thanks to their heroism and speed, the German Army reached Rotterdam in three days. The parachutists all risked being wiped out had the SS not accomplished their lightning-thrust.

In Belgium, the SS regiment Der Führer faced head on the French Army, which after falling in the Sedan trap, had rushed toward Breda, Holland. There, one would see for the first time a small motivated army route a large national army. It took one SS regiment and a number of German troops to throw the whole French Army off balance and drive it back from Breda to Antwerp, Belgium, and Northern France. The Leibstandarte and Der Führer regiments jointly advanced on the large Zealand Islands, between the Sceldis and Rhine rivers. In a few days, they would be under control. In no time the Leibstandarte had then crossed Belgium and Northern France. The second major battle of

SS regiments occurs in concert with the Army tank division. The SS, still with their tanks, are under the command of General Rommel and General Guderian. They spearhead a thrust toward the North Sea. Sepp Dietrich and his troops have now crossed the French canals, but are pinned down by the enemy in a mud field, and just manage to avoid extermination. But despite the loss of many soldiers, officers and one battalion commander, all killed in action, the Germans reach Dunkirk. Hitler was very proud of them. The following week, Hitler deploys them along the Somme River, from which they will pour out across France. There again, the SS will prove itself to be the best fighting force in the world. Sepp Dietrich and the 2nd Division of the SS, Totenkopf, advanced so far and so fast they even lost contact with the rest of the Army for three days. They found themselves in Lyon, France, a city they had to leave after the French-German peace treaty. Sepp Dietrich and a handful of SS on trucks had achieved the impossible. Der Führer SS division spearheaded the Maginot Line breakthrough. Everyone had said the Line was impenetrable. The war in France was over. Hitler had the three SS divisions march through Paris. Berlin honored the heroes also. But the Army was so jealous that it would not cite a single SS for valor or bravery. It was Hitler himself who in front of the German congress solemnly paid tribute to the heroism of the SS. It was on this occasion that Hitler officially recognized the name of the Waffen SS. But it was more than just a name change. The Waffen SS became Germanic, as volunteers were accepted from all Germanic countries. The SS had found out by themselves that the people of Western Europe were closely related to them: the Norwegians, the Danes, the Dutch, the Flemish - all belonged to the same Germanic family. These Germanic people were themselves very much impressed by the SS, and so, by the way, were the French. The people of Western Europe had marveled at this extraordinary German force with a style unlike any others: if two SS scouts would reach town ahead of everybody else, on motorbikes, before presenting themselves to the local authorities they would first clean themselves up so as to be of impeccable appearance. The people could not help but be impressed. The admiration felt by young Europeans of Germanic stock for the SS was very natural. Thousands of young men from Norway, Denmark, Flanders, and Holland were awed with surprise and admiration. They felt irresistibly drawn to the SS. It was not Europe, but their own Germanic race that so deeply stirred their souls. They identified with the victorious Germans. To them, Hitler was the most exceptional man ever seen. Hitler understood them and had the remarkable idea to open the doors of the SS to them. It was quite risky. No one had ever thought of this before. Prior to Hitler, German imperialism consisted only of peddling goods to other countries, without any thought of creating an ideology called "community" - a common ideal with its neighbors. Suddenly, instead of peddling and haggling, here was a man who offered a glorious ideal: an enthralling social justice, for which they all had yearned in vain, for years. A broad New Order, instead of the formless cosmopolitanism of the pre-war so-called "democracies." The response to Hitler's offer was overwhelming. Legions from Norway, Denmark, Holland, and Flanders were formed. Thousands of young men now wore the SS uniform. Hitler created specifically for them the famous Viking division. One destined to become one of the most formidable divisions of the Waffen SS. The Army was still doing everything to stop men from joining the SS in Germany and acted as though the SS did not exist. Against this background of

obstructionism at home, it was normal and understandable that the SS would welcome men from outside Germany. The Germans living abroad provided a rich source of volunteers. As there are millions of German-Americans, there are millions of Germans in all parts of Europe - in Hungary, in Rumania, in Russia. There was even a Soviet Republic of the Volga Germans. These were the descendants of Germans who had emigrated two centuries before. Other Europeans, like the French Huguenots, who went to Prussia, also shared this type of emigration with the Germans. So, Europe was dotted with German settlements. The victories of the Third Reich had made them proud of belonging to the German family. Hitler welcomed them home. He saw them, first, as a source of elite SS men, and also as an important factor in unifying all Germans ideologically. Here again, the enthusiastic response was amazing. 300,000 volunteers of German ancestry would join, from all over Europe. 54,000 from Romania alone. In the context of that era, these were remarkable figures. There were numerous problems to overcome. For instance, most of the Germanic volunteers no longer spoke German. Their families had settled in foreign lands for 200 years or so. In Spain, for instance, I can see the children of my legionaries being assimilated with the Spaniards — and their grandchildren no longer speak French. The Germans follow the same pattern. When the German volunteers first arrived at the SS, they spoke many different languages, had different ways and different needs. How to find officers who could speak all these languages? How to coordinate such a disparate lot? The mastery of these problems was the miracle of the Waffen SS assimilation program. This homecoming of the separated “tribes” was seen by the Waffen SS as the foundation for real European unity. The 300,000 Germanic volunteers were welcomed by the SS as brothers, and they reciprocated by being as dedicated, loyal and heroic as the German SS. Within the year, everything had changed for the Waffen SS. The barracks were full, the academies were full. The strictest admission standards and requirements equally applied for the Germanic volunteers. They had to be the best in every way, both physically and mentally. They had to be the best of the Germanic race. German racialism has been deliberately distorted. It never was an anti-“other race” racialism. It was a pro-German racialism. It was concerned with making the German race strong and healthy in every way. Hitler was not interested in having millions of degenerates if it was in his power not to have them. Today one finds rampant alcohol and drug addiction everywhere. Hitler cared that the German families be healthy, cared that they raise healthy children for the renewal of a healthy nation. German racialism meant re-discovering the creative values of their own race, re-discovering their culture. It was a search for excellence, a noble idea. National Socialist racialism was not against the other races, it was for its own race. It aimed at defending and improving its race and wished that all other races did the same for themselves. That was demonstrated when the Waffen SS enlarged its ranks to include 60,000 Islamic SS. The Waffen SS respected their way of life, their customs, and their religious beliefs. Each Islamic SS battalion had an imam, each company had a mullah. It was our common wish that their qualities found their highest expression. This was our racialism. I was present when each of my Islamic comrades received a personal gift from Hitler during the New Year. It was a pendant with a small Koran. Hitler was honoring them with this small symbolic gift. He was honoring them with what was the most important aspect of their lives and their history. National Socialist racialism was loyal to

the German race and totally respected all other races. At this point, one hears: "What about the anti-Jewish racism?" One can answer: "What about Jewish anti-Gentilism?" It has been the misfortune of the Jewish race that they never could get on with any other race. It is an unusual historical fact and phenomenon. When one studies the history-and I say this without any passion- of the Jewish people, their evolution across the centuries, one observes that always, at all times, and at all places, they were hated. They were hated in ancient Egypt, they were hated in ancient Greece, they were hated in Roman times to such a degree that 3,000 of them were deported to Sardine. It was the first Jewish deportation. They were hated in Spain, in France, in England (they were banned from England for centuries), and in Germany. The conscientious Jewish author Lazare wrote a very interesting book on Anti-Semitism, where he asked himself: "We Jews should ask ourselves a question: why are we always hated everywhere? It is not because of our persecutors, all of different times and places. It is because there is something within us that is very unlikeable." What is unlikeable is that the Jews have always wanted to live as a privileged class divinely-chosen and beyond scrutiny. This attitude has made them unlikeable everywhere. The Jewish race is, therefore, a unique case. Hitler had no intention of destroying it. He wanted the Jews to find their own identity in their own environment, but not to the detriment of others. The fight-if we can call it that of National Socialism against the Jews was purely limited to one objective: that the Jews leave Germany in peace. It was planned to give them a country of their own, outside Germany. Madagascar was contemplated, but the plans were dropped when the United States entered the war. In the meanwhile, Hitler thought of letting the Jews live in their own traditional ghettos. They would have their own organizations, they would run their own affairs and live the way they wanted to live. They had their own police, their own tramways, their own flag, and their own factories which, incidentally, were built by the German government. As far as other races were concerned, they were all welcomed in Germany as guests, but not as privileged occupants. In one year, the Waffen SS had gathered a large number of Germanic people from Northern Europe and hundreds of thousands of Germans from outside Germany, the Volksdeutsche, or Germanic SS. It was then that the conflict between Communism and National Socialism burst into the open. The conflict had always existed. In "Mein Kampf", Hitler had clearly set out his objective: "to eliminate the world threat of Communism," and incidentally claim some land in Eastern Europe! This eastward expansionism created much outrage: How could the Germans claim land in Russia? To this one can answer: How could the Americans claim Indian land from the Atlantic to the Pacific? How could France claim Southern Flanders and Roussillon from Spain? And what of Britain, and what of so many other countries who have claimed, conquered and settled in other territories? Somehow at the time, it was all right for all these countries to settle foreign lands but it was not for Germany. Personally, I have always vigorously defended the Russians, and I finally did succeed in convincing Hitler that Germans had to live with Russians as partners, not as conquerors. Before achieving this partnership, there was first the matter of wiping out Communism. During the Soviet-German Pact, Hitler was trying to gain time but the Soviets were intensifying their acts of aggression from Estonia to Bukovina. I now read extracts from Soviet documents. They are most revealing. Let's read from Marshal Voroshilov himself:

“We now have the time to prepare ourselves to be the executioner of the capitalist world while it is agonizing. We must, however, be cautious. The Germans must not have any inkling that we are preparing to stab them in the back while they are busy fighting the French. Otherwise, they could change their general plan, and attack us.”

In the same record, Marshal Choupanov wrote: “The coexistence between Hitler’s Germany and the Soviet Union is only temporary. We will not make it last very long.” Marshal Timoshenko, for his part, did not want to be so hasty: “Let us not forget that our war material from our Siberian factories will not be delivered until the Fall.” This was written at the beginning of 1941, and the material was only to be delivered in the Fall. The war industry Commissariat Report stated: We will not be in full production until 1942. Marshal Zhukov made this extraordinary admission: “Hitler is in a hurry to invade us; he has good reasons for it.” Indeed, Hitler had good reasons to invade Russia in a hurry because he realized he would be wiped out if he did not. Zhukov added: “We need a few more months to rectify many of our defects before the end of 1941. We need 18 months to complete the modernization of our forces.” The orders are quite precise. At the fourth session of the Supreme Soviet in 1939, it is decreed that Army officers will serve three years and the soldiers will serve four years, and the Navy personnel, five years. All these decisions were made less than a month after the Soviets signed the peace treaty with Germany. Thus, the Soviets, pledged to peace, were frantically preparing for war. More than 2,500 new concrete fortifications were built between 1939 and 1940. 160 divisions were made combat-ready. 60 tank divisions were on full alert. The Germans only had 10 panzer tank divisions. In 1941, the Soviets had 17,000 tanks, and by 1942 they had 32,000. They had 92,578 pieces of artillery. And their 17,545 combat planes in 1940 outnumbered the German air force. It is easy to understand that with such war preparations going on, Hitler was left with only one option: Invade the Soviet Union immediately, or face annihilation. Hitler’s Russian campaign was the “last chance” campaign. Hitler did not go into Russia with any great optimism. He told me later on: “When I entered Russia, I was like a man facing a shut door. I knew I had to crash through it, but without knowing what was behind it.” Hitler was right. He knew the Soviets were strong, but above all he knew they were going to be a lot stronger. 1941 was the only time Hitler had some respite. The British had not succeeded yet in expanding the war. Hitler, who never wanted the war with Britain, still tried for peace. He invited me to spend a week at his home. He wanted to discuss the whole situation and hear what I had to say about it. He spoke very simply and clearly. The atmosphere was informal and relaxed. He made you feel at home because he really enjoyed being hospitable. He buttered pieces of toast in a leisurely fashion and passed them around, and although he did not drink, he went to get a bottle of champagne after each meal because he knew I enjoyed a glass at the end of it. All without fuss and with genuine friendliness. It was part of his genius that he was also a man of simple ways without the slightest affection and a man of great humility. We talked about England. I asked him bluntly: “Why on earth didn’t you finish the British off in Dunkirk? Everyone knew you could have wiped them out.” He answered: “Yes, I withheld my troops and let the British escape back to England. The humiliation of such a defeat would have made it difficult to try for peace with them afterward.” At the same time, Hitler told me he did not

want to dispel the Soviet belief that he was going to invade England. He mentioned that he even had small Anglo-German dictionaries distributed to his troops in Poland. The Soviet spies there duly reported to the Kremlin that Germany's presence in Poland was a bluff and that they were about to leave for the British Isles. On 22 June 1941, it was Russia and not England that Germany invaded. The initial victories were swift but costly. I lived the epic struggle of the Russian Front. It was a tragic epic; it was also martyrdom. The endless thousands of miles of the Russian steppes were overwhelming. We had to reach the Caucasus by foot, always under extreme conditions. In the summer we often walked knee-deep in mud, and in winter there were below-zero freezing temperatures. But for a matter of a few days, Hitler would have won the war in Russia in 1941. Before the battle of Moscow, Hitler had succeeded in defeating the Soviet Army and taking considerable numbers of prisoners. General Guderian's tank division, which had all by itself encircled more than a million Soviet troops near Kiev, had reached Moscow right up to the city's tramway lines. It was then that suddenly an unbelievable freeze happened: 40, 42, 50 degrees Celsius below zero! This meant that not only were men freezing, but the equipment was also freezing, on the spot. No tanks could move. Yesterday's mud had frozen to a solid block of ice, half a meter high, icing up the tank treads. In 24 hours, all of our tactical options had been reversed. It was at that time that masses of Siberian troops brought back from the Russian Far East were thrown against the Germans. These few fateful days of ice that made the difference between victory and defeat, Hitler owed to the Italian campaign in Greece during the fall of 1940.

Mussolini was envious of Hitler's successes. It was deep and silent jealousy. I was a friend of Mussolini, I knew him well. He was a remarkable man, but Europe was not of great concern to him. He did not like to be a spectator, watching Hitler winning everywhere. He felt compelled to do something himself, fast. Impulsively, he launched a senseless offensive against Greece. His troops were immediately defeated. But it gave the British the excuse to invade Greece, which up till now had been uninvolved in the war. From Greece, the British could bomb the Rumanian oil wells, which were vital to Germany's war effort. Greece could also be used to cut off the German troops on their way to Russia. Hitler was forced to quash the threat pre-emptively. He had to waste five weeks in the Balkans. His victories there was an incredible logistical achievement, but they delayed the start of the Russian campaign for five critical weeks. If Hitler had been able to start the campaign in time, as it was planned, he would have entered Moscow five weeks before, in the sun of early fall, when the earth was still dry. The war would have been over, and the Soviet Union would have been a thing of the past. The combination of the sudden freeze and the arrival of fresh Siberian troops spread panic among some of the old Army generals. They wanted to retreat to 200 miles from Moscow. It is hard to imagine such an inane strategy! The freeze affected Russia equally, from West to East, and to retreat 200 miles in the open steppes would only make things worse. I was commanding my troops in the Ukraine at the time and it was 42 degrees centigrade below zero. Such a retreat meant abandoning all the heavy artillery, including assault tanks and panzers that were stuck in the ice. It also meant exposing half a million men to heavy Soviet sniping. In fact, it meant condemning them to certain death. One need only recall Napoleon's retreat in October. He reached the Berezina River in November, and by December 6th all the

French troops had left Russia. It was cold enough, but it was not a winter campaign. Can you just imagine in 1941 half a million Germans fighting howling snowstorms, cut off from supplies, attacked from all sides by tens of thousands of Cossacks? I have faced charging Cossacks, and only the utmost superior firepower will stop them. In order to counter such an insane retreat, Hitler had to fire more than 30 generals within a few days. It was then that he called on the Waffen SS to fill in the gap and boost morale. Immediately the SS held fast on the Moscow front. Right through the war the Waffen SS never retreated. They would rather die than retreat. One cannot forget the figures. During the 1941 winter, the Waffen SS lost 43,000 men in front of Moscow. The regiment *Der Führer* fought almost literally to the last man. Only 35 men survived out of the entire regiment. The *Der Führer* men stood fast and no Soviet troops got through. They had to try to bypass the SS in the snow. This is how famous Russian General Vlassov was captured by the Totenkopf SS division. Without their heroism, Germany would have been annihilated by December 1941. Hitler would never forget it: he gauged the willpower that the Waffen SS had displayed in front of Moscow. They had shown character and guts. And that is what Hitler admired most of all: guts. For him, it was not enough to have intelligent or clever associates. These people can often fall to pieces, as we will see during the following winter at the battle of Stalingrad with General Paulus. Hitler knew that only sheer energy and guts, the refusal to surrender, the will to hang tough against all odds, would win the war. The blizzards of the Russian steppes had shown how the best army in the world, the German Army, with thousands of highly trained officers and millions of highly disciplined men, was just not enough. Hitler realized they would be beaten, that something else was needed, and that only the unshakable faith in a high ideal could overcome the situation. The Waffen SS had this ideal, and Hitler used them from now on at full capacity. From all parts of Europe, volunteers rushed to help their German brothers. It was then that was born the third great Waffen SS. First, there was the German, then the Germanic, and now there was the European Waffen SS. 125,000 would then volunteer to save Western Culture and Civilization. The volunteers joined with full knowledge that the SS incurred the highest death tolls. More than 250,000 out of one million would die in action. For them, the Waffen SS was, despite all the deaths, the birth of Europe. Napoleon said in St. Helena: "There will be no Europe until a leader arises." The young European volunteers have observed two things: first, that Hitler was the only leader who was capable of building Europe, and secondly that Hitler, and Hitler alone, could defeat the world threat of Communism. For the European SS, Europe of petty jealousies, jingoism, border disputes, and economic rivalries was of no interest. It was too petty and demeaning; that Europe was no longer valid for them. At the same time the European SS, as much as they admired Hitler and the German people, did not want to become Germans. They were men of their own people and Europe was the gathering of the various people of Europe. European unity was to be achieved through harmony, not the domination of one over the others. I discussed these issues at length with both Hitler and Himmler. Hitler like all men of genius had outgrown the national stage. Napoleon was first a Corsican, then a Frenchman, then a European and then a singularly universal man. Likewise, Hitler had been an Austrian, then a German, then a greater German, then Germanic, and then he had seen and grasped the magnitude of building Europe. After the defeat of Communism, the

Waffen SS had a solemn duty to gather all their efforts and strength to build a united Europe, and there was no question that non-German Europe should be dominated by Germany. Before joining the Waffen SS, we had known very difficult conflicts. We had gone to the Eastern front first as adjunct units to the German army but during the battle of Stalingrad, we had seen that Europe was critically endangered. The great common effort was imperative. One night I had an 8-hour debate with Hitler and Himmler on the status of non-German Europeans within the new Europe. For the present, we expected to be treated as equals fighting for a common cause. Hitler understood fully and from then on, we had our own flag, our own officers, our own language, our own religion. We had total equal status. I was the first one to have Catholic padres in the Waffen SS. Later padres of all denominations were available to all those who wanted them. The Islamic SS division had their own mullahs and the French even had a bishop! We were satisfied that with Hitler, Europeans would be federated as equals. We felt that the best way to deserve our place as equals were in this critical hour to defend Europe equally well as our German comrades. What mattered above all for Hitler was courage. He created new chivalry. Those who earn the order of the Ritterkreuz, meaning the cross of the knights, were indeed the new knights. They earned this nobility of courage. Each of our units going home after the war would be the force that would protect the peoples' rights in our respective countries. All the SS understood that European unity meant the whole of Europe, even Russia. There had been a great lack of knowledge among many Germans regarding the Russians. Many believed that the Russians were all Communists while in fact, Russian representation in the Communist hierarchy was less than insignificant. They also believed that the Russians were diametrically opposite from the Europeans. Yet they have similar familial structures, they have an old civilization, deep religious faith, and traditions which are not unlike those of other European countries. The European SS saw the new Europe in the form of three great components; central Europe as the powerhouse of Europe, Western Europe as the cultural heart of Europe and eastern Europe as the potential of Europe. Thus, the Europe the SS envisioned was alive and real. Its six hundred million inhabitants would live from the North Sea to Vladivostok. It was in this span of 8,000 miles that Europe could achieve its destiny. A space for young people to start new lives. This Europe would be the beacon of the world. A remarkable racial ensemble. An ancient civilization, a spiritual force, and the most advanced technological and scientific complex. The SS prepared for the high destiny of Europe. Compare these aims, these ideals with the "Allies." The Roosevelts, the Churchills sold Europe out in Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam. They cravenly capitulated to the Soviets. They delivered half of the European continent to Communist slavery. They let the rest of Europe disintegrate morally, without any ideal to sustain it. The SS knew what they wanted: the Europe of ideals was salvation for all. This faith in higher ideals inspired four hundred thousand German SS, three hundred thousand Volksdeutsche or Germanic SS and three hundred thousand other European SS. Volunteers all, one million builders of Europe. The ranks of the SS grew proportionately with the growth of the war in Russia. The nearer Germany was to defeat the more volunteers arrived at the front. This was phenomenal; eight days before the final defeat I saw hundreds of young men join the SS on the front. Right to the end, they knew they had to do the impossible to stop the enemy. So, from the one hundred and eighty-men strong Leibstandarte in 1933 to the SS

regiments before 1939, to the three regiments in Poland, to the three divisions in France, to the six divisions at the beginning of the Russian war, to the 38 divisions in 1944, the Waffen SS reached 50 divisions in 1945. The more SS died, the more others rushed to replace them. They had faith and stood firm to the extreme limit. The exact reverse happened in January 1943 at Stalingrad. The defeat there was decided by a man without courage. He was not capable of facing danger with determination, of saying unequivocally: "I will not surrender; I will stand fast until I win." He was morally and physically gutless and he lost. A year later the SS Viking and the SS Wallonia divisions were encircled in the same way at Cherkassy. With the disaster of Stalingrad fresh in the minds of our soldiers, they could have been subject to demoralization. On top of it, I was laid down with a deep side wound and 102-degree temperature. As a general in command of the SS Wallonia forces, I knew that all this was not conducive to high morale. I got up and for 17 days I led the charge after charge to break the blockade, engaged in numerous hand-to-hand combats, was wounded four times but never stopped fighting. All my men did just as much and more. The siege was broken by sheer SS guts and spirit. After Stalingrad, when many thought that all was lost, when the Soviet forces poured across Ukraine, the Waffen SS stopped the Soviets dead in their tracks. They re-took Kharkov and inflicted a severe defeat on the Soviet army. This was a pattern; the SS would over and overturn reverses into victories. The same fearless energy was also present in Normandy. Gen. Patton called them "the proud SS divisions." The SS was the backbone of resistance in Normandy. Eisenhower observed, "the SS fought as usual to the last man." If the Waffen SS had not existed, Europe would have been overrun entirely by the Soviets by 1944. They would have reached Paris long before the Americans. The Waffen SS heroism stopped the Soviet juggernaut at Moscow, Kharkov, Cherkassy, and Tarnopol. The Soviets lost more than 12 months. Without SS resistance the Soviets would have been in Normandy before Eisenhower. The people showed deep gratitude to the young men who sacrificed their lives. Not since the great religious orders of the Middle Ages had there been such selfless idealism and heroism. In this century of materialism, the SS stand out as a shining light of spirituality. I have no doubt whatever that the sacrifices and incredible feats of the Waffen SS will have their own epic poets like Schiller. Greatness in adversity is the distinction of the SS. The curtain of silence fell on the Waffen SS after the war but now more and more young people somehow know of its existence, of its achievements. Its fame is growing and the young demand to know more. In one hundred years almost, everything will be forgotten but the greatness and the heroism of the Waffen SS will be remembered."

To understand the way of thinking and handling of Leon Degrelle one must know the history of Belgium and the Walloon people. It was fanatic nationalism and the desire to restore the old glories of the Dukes of Burgundy that was one of the motivations behind his way of thinking. According to Degrelle, Belgium needed its place back in the new Europe after the war.

Stories from the front

Why did people join the Waffen SS and leave their homes to fight on different fronts? The propaganda for the recruiting of Waffen SS members was of course very convincing and strongly politicized: one must fight for the Fatherland and fight against the godless Bolsheviks. Also, the honor of becoming a member of such an elite army and to be part of the future of the great German empire that would last for a thousand years was the climax in one's life. But was this propaganda from the National-Socialist party the only reason why people joined the Waffen SS? Absolutely not! Some people joined because they had troubles at home, family problems because they were unemployed, ... For others, it was their answer to the call of one of their leaders (not Hitler in particular) and for the adventure and fame that a career with the Waffen SS could bring. Last but not least many of them cared for the future of their country and Europe, and they wanted to know where they would be after all of this – the war – was over. As one can see there were a lot of reasons why people joined the Waffen SS, however, two reasons seem to score pretty high: conservatism and anti-communism. However, it remains difficult to imagine what moved these young men more than 7 decades ago to join the Waffen SS on a voluntary basis to an unknown front. To be clear, not all of these soldiers were volunteers. There were lots of young men that were forced to join the Waffen SS and because of this the International Military Tribunal in 1946 declared the conscripts of the Waffen SS not guilty of war crimes. These are the stories of brave young men – the assault generation as they were called - that once were part of the Waffen SS. It was a society that had been forged in the sacrifice, sweat, and blood of the battlefield. By 1945, the Waffen SS had proved by its combat success that European people could exist together, as long as they recognized and accepted the national differences between one another. Despised and hated by so many because of the actions of just a few there are still people that can see these men as just regular soldiers, and heroes, because they can see the other side of the coin. I can say that the men of the Waffen SS that I met in the last 25 years were no criminals.



The story of Marcel

“I worked in Ludwigsburg together with another boy from Tienen (Belgium) in a factory that made small components for engines. We were both from the same mindset, that was nationalists, and I have to tell you that there was enough propaganda in Germany made by the National Socialist Party to join the Waffen SS. The propaganda was so convincing that we couldn’t resist the temptation. The propaganda posters and placards said “Auch du!” – “You too”, join the Waffen SS or join the German Armed Forces to fight communism!

It was at the end of August 1943 that we finally enlisted in the Waffen SS, more particularly in the Flemish Legion. We left for Frankfurt for our medical examination and other testing and we were both found suitable for service. When I was accepted in the Waffen SS I requested to be put into a Panzer unit. Funny enough my request was granted and I was sent to Sennheim (SS-Ausbildungslager) for 14 days. There we had to swear the oath to Hitler and after that, we were taken by train to Breslau. In Breslau, we received our infantry training. From Breslau, we went to Milovic where we were trained to become

truck drivers. From Milovic we went to Debica where we finally received our Panzer training (Sturmgeschütze). The Panzer training lasted about two months and on Christmas night of 1943, we were celebrating the end of our training. We were all happy and joyful and everybody was singing. We had some very good food, one can say maybe the best food I've ever had. While enjoying our dinner and singing our songs the joyful atmosphere got interrupted by a courier that came in with a telegram for our commander. Our commander dropped his cutlery and stood up to accept the telegram. He read the message in silence. Everybody had become so quiet that the silence was almost frightening. Then came the words: "Men, prepare yourselves to go to the Eastern Front!"

A few minutes after we got the news we were already preparing to take off to the East. We started loading all our equipment on trains: trucks, tanks, ammunition, etc. There were also some soldiers from a FLAK unit (Anti-aircraft unit) with Vierling FLAK and 22 mm canons boarding the train. Once everything was ready, we left for the Eastern Front, to Russia, with destination unknown. I remember it was a very long trip with many ups and downs. Sometimes the train had to come to a full stop because of aerial attacks. Finally, we arrived in a train station in the Zhitomir area. What we didn't know was that the Russians were still occupying the train station and surrounding areas. So, at our arrival, we got caught in our first real fight. I remember that our infantry was already fighting the Russians and we received the news that the 1st Infantry Company was missing in action. The 2nd Infantry Company was tasked to go out and set up a search and rescue mission. Unfortunately, the 2nd Infantry Company was ambushed and after heavy fighting, they were taken as POWs (Prisoner of War) by the Russians. Later I heard that these poor guys had to march, stripped from their clothes and shoes, with no food or water, to a POW camp in Tambov which was approximately 400 Km from Moscow. For us, the Panzer unit, things turned out differently. We stayed out of the hands of the Russians as we were constantly fighting and retreating until we reached Jampol. There we, the Flemish Legion, were surrounded by the Russians. It was a nightmare as our troops were decimated there. However, I was lucky as I was located at the outskirts of the city with my unit. We had to get out of this hell hole so we looked for a way out. Nearby we saw a bridge that was still intact. We as well as the Russians wanted to keep the bridge intact. We needed it to get out of the city and the Russians needed it to get into the city. Our commander knew that the Russians were coming and that they used the technique of carpet bombing for certain locations to annihilate the ground armies. We only had 3 or 4 tanks left in our unit, nothing more. So, our unit received the order that all Sturmgeschütze had to cross the bridge at full speed. That's what they did and once our comrades crossed the bridge they'd spread out and destroyed whatever they could find on their paths. Surprisingly enough they broke through the Russian lines with such a magnitude that all the Russian soldiers were in a panic. Then all of a sudden all Panzer had disappeared. After a couple of minutes we saw the Panzers turning back towards the bridge! Now they were attacking the Russians in the back. Our unit survived this battle however the poor guys that were sitting in the back of the trucks, one of them I was driving, and who fell out were lost forever. We were not able to turn back and pick them up as it was too dangerous. Lucky for us it froze the day before

and all fields were covered with ice. That was our only luck... Can you imagine if that were mud? It would've been a hopeless situation.

While crossing the fields we were attacked by Russian artillery. I was a truck driver then and I had 10-12 wounded soldiers on my truck. When I say wounded I mean severely wounded! One poor guy had both legs and one arm blown off. I was surprised he was still alive. Another one was hit in the abdomen by a bullet and you could see his intestines, that's how big that hole was. While driving my truck to the fires of hell of the Russian artillery my truck got hit by a piece of shrapnel. That piece of shrapnel went through the passenger door cutting my passenger in two! Then it ripped apart my seat as it passed me in the back and then it exited through my door. I was very lucky not to get hit by that projectile however my comrade who was sitting in the passenger seat died instantly. After a long drive, we arrived in Stara Konstantinov which was still in German hands. There we were able to rest a little bit but soon we had to hit the road again. Before we hit the road again we had to modify a part of our uniform. You have to know that when I joined the Waffen SS I had the "Trifos" or swastika with three arms on my collar tabs. This was the symbol of the Flemish Legion of the Waffen SS. Our commander Konrad Schellong ordered us, in Stara Konstantinov, to remove the trifos from our uniform and to replace it with the SS runes. Some of the men of my company were not happy with this order to replace the trifos with the SS runes as they felt they belonged to the Flemish Legion in the first place and not to the Waffen SS. The protest didn't change the situation at all and the SS runes were put on our uniforms. There was absolutely nothing we could do about this situation. After this little incident, we were relieved by another unit and we were put back on a train heading west this time. We went through the Carpathians – Romania, Hungary, and a piece of Czechoslovakia, to finally arrive at our temporary destination in Poland: Jaslo (Jassel in German). We had to stay there for a couple of days because there wasn't enough room to station our unit at our final destination: Ersatzlager Debica. After spending a few days in Jaslo we finally left for our final destination. In Debica we had four camps and it was there when reinforcements arrived.

In Debica we were assigned a Panzer or tank however the funny fact was that the Germans units always had priority in choosing a Panzer. It was a normal thing that the Germans had priority in choosing the equipment and sometimes all Panzer was gone... nothing was left for us. Maybe this was out luck so we didn't have to go to the front all the time. However, this time we got a Hetzer Panzer or a Jagdpanzer 38(t) Hetzer (Baiter or Troublemaker), Sd.Kfz.138/2, but it was also known simply as Panzerjäger 38(t). It was armed with 75mm Pak 39 L/48 gun. An interesting feature was the remotely controlled MG34/42 mounted on the roof, with 360 degrees rotation for local defense. The machine gun had a 50-round drum magazine and could be aimed and fired from inside the vehicle. The Hetzer was able to knock out a T34 Russian Tank from a distance of 700m if it would hit the frontal armor of the T34. But the Hetzer was a very light Panzer and was very vulnerable during battle.

From Debica we had to move to Czechoslovakia to a place that was located at approximately 60 Km from Prague. We arrived in an abandoned town where only the mayor and a few other people were left behind to keep an eye on things. The reason this village – and some other villages in the area – was abandoned was because the year before Reinhard Heydrich was murdered in Prague. I really don't know what happened to the inhabitants of these villages. We were not allowed to touch anything although we were allowed to sleep in the houses. During the day we were practicing drill and doing military exercises. Actually, we had a really good life there. From there we had to regroup or reform a Panzer unit which was very expensive and time-consuming. Once we were regrouped, we were sent to the Lüneburger Heide which was 40 Km south of Hamburg. The Germans believed that the Allies would drop paratroopers at that location so we had to go there immediately. We were used as security forces for that location. So, we arrived there at the end of October 1944 and we stayed there on some local farms. I remember that we were staying on a farm with seven soldiers, five Flemings, and two Germans. We, the Flemings were always singing Flemish songs of course, and we were doing this in the massive living room of the house. At a certain moment, we heard some noise coming from behind the entrance door. We opened the door and there stood the farmer, his wife, and some servants. All were listening to our songs and music that we made. They asked us where we were from and proudly, we told them: "From Flanders!" Then came the time to leave again and we were back on the road, this time to Bad Saarow, 30 Km east of Berlin. In Bad Saarow there were living lots of German movie stars.

There we were stationed in a brand-new military camp. While staying there we had to do some military exercises again, but this time we had to practice with hand grenades. Our exercise grenades, or dummy grenades, had a yellow head so we knew they were not real. However, one day one of our NCOs held a grenade in his hand, he pulled the pin, and that thing just exploded in his hands. Was it a mistake from his part or was in an act of sabotage? Who knows? The NCO died instantly and after the incident there followed an investigation to make sure that sabotage could be excluded. When the investigation was over, we received our new Panzers. My birthday was on February 28 and on March 1 – 1945 we had to go back to the front. The front line was now located at the River Oder – at the border with Poland. The Russians were now very close to the heart of the Reich. On our first night at the front, we stood ready with approximately 120-140 tanks. Of course, these were not all from the same caliber. They were just the leftovers that they found: Panzer IV, Hetzer, Tiger, etc. We were there together with a division of the Wehrmacht. When I think back about that division, I have to say that they were just a bunch of untrained soldiers of the Luftwaffe (Air Force) and Kriegsmarine (Navy). I felt really bad for them as they had no clue what they were doing and what was going to happen in the next few hours. They had no front experience at all so when the battle started hundreds of them died instantly. During one of the last fights, I became isolated with my tank, which was a Hetzer. Our tank commander had committed Fahnenflucht or desertion. Because of that, I became the commander of our tank. Actually, I had no choice as I was the highest in rank. Usually, our tank would carry 4 to 5 infantry soldiers, as protection against enemy infantry. I never understood the benefit of putting men on a tank. They were just living targets for enemy fire, not protected against artillery fire like we were inside our tank.

With an infantry assault they were able to take cover behind the tank and advance in all safety but otherwise, there was no protection at all for them. So, our last month and a half at the front we were on our own. I have to tell you, and this is the truth, that we were very lucky that we were always able to find ammunition and fuel for our tank. While we were in smaller towns or villages, we were always able to find plenty of food, which was sometimes hidden in barns under a stack of hay. Animals were just running around so we shot pigs and cows to eat. The only thing is that we had to butcher them but when you're hungry the butchering part is not a problem at all! Sometimes we would find an abandoned truck full of fuel so we were always able to refuel our Panzer. Then in other trucks, we would find ammunition and funny enough it was always the ammunition that we needed for our guns. While roving on our own, detached from our unit, the only contact we had was with our unit commander by phone, and that is if there was a phone line available. My unit commander was a Fleming as well and when we communicated, we talked to each other in Dutch. That way the Russians wouldn't be able to understand us! He asked me where I was and I told him we were in Stettin. Immediately he told me to pull back. He said that we were in a pocket of 30 Km, behind enemy lines! In Stettin we drove through the city, looking for a way out. All buildings were on fire and most of them were at the point of collapsing. At the end of the street, we saw a bridge and I asked my driver what he thought about it, looking at the fact of crossing the bridge with our Panzer. He replied that the bridge wasn't wide enough however he would try to cross it at about 50 Km/h. That way, if the bridge would collapse the Panzer would already be on the other side of the river. The river was about 8 to 10m wide so before the bridge would collapse, we would've been safe on the other side. We crossed the bridge that day! Almost every day we were engaged in heavy fighting and during one of the last fights, we were able to regroup. We were back in business with 4 tanks. One day we were driving out of the woods and we saw a nice big farm on top of a hill. The farm was brand new and it was very beautiful to look at. Miraculously it was still untouched by bullets or artillery fire. We decided to stay in this beautiful farm. One of our Unterscharführer was named Richard Wagner like the famous composer. He was actually related to him and he had the same name! When we entered the farm, we saw a nice big piano standing in a corner of the living room. Wagner instantly started playing on the piano but then, after a minute or so, he suddenly stopped playing. He looked at me and said: "The Russians won't get this piano!" Then he did something that completely took me by surprise. He took a grenade, placed it inside the piano. Gently he pulled the pin and closed the piano. Of course, we left the house in a hurry and there it was... The grenade went off with a huge blast destroying this nice piece of artwork. After this short break at the farm, we got isolated again. It was just our tank crew and four infantrymen. We drove through the woods again and to find another farm on top of a hill. This farm wasn't as beautiful as the last one however there was something that triggered our senses. Around the barn of the complex, we noticed a pile of empty shells lying on the ground. Luftwaffe anti-aircraft! We approached the barn and there we found some ground personnel of the Luftwaffe however they were not capable to fight. We looked at the surrounding area to see if there were enemy units approaching and suddenly at the end of a field, hiding under a tree, we observed a tank! Was it the enemy waiting for us? No, it was one of ours! We went to take a closer look and we noticed that it

was out of service. The crew was gone so we decided to take its ammunition. While we were getting out of our tank to get the ammo my gunner said that he was going to load a round in the tank's gun. He said that he wanted to be prepared in case the enemy would show up. At this point in the war, you never knew what was or could be coming to you. Not even a minute later someone yelled "Panzer von links!", and we ran back to our tank. Thanks to the loaded gun of our tank we were able to knock out the approaching enemy tank. However more enemy tanks started to approach our position so we had to load, aim, and fire! We had to repeat this process until our gun suddenly jammed. Actually, the barrel wouldn't move forward anymore so I told my driver to back up and drive away in a safe direction as fast as he could. That day we drove for our life until we drove over a hill straight into a valley where we were safe. There we leveled our tank and we drove against a huge pine tree, barrel first of course. In first gear, we were pushing against the tree but because of the built-up pressure of the barrel, the tank would slide back. At a certain point, we thought that the barrel could explode at any time however the barrel worked again as the pressure was relieved. After that, we proceeded to a nearby village. There we aimed for the church; we pointed at the church to set the sights back for our gun. Once that was done, we were back in business!

This is a part of my story which I don't really like to tell. We had to retreat because the Russians were with so many that we wouldn't survive for ten seconds. Lots of my friends were killed in action and one day we had no choice to retreat. While retreating we observed a Stalin Panzer on top of a hill. We were absolutely unable to fight such a beast with a small gun. The Stalin had front armor of about 30 cm, which was a lot thicker than the armor of our Hetzer. The only weak part on the Stalin was the turret. It was mounted on a light ring to make it able to turn around. I told my gunner to aim for the turret. He fired a shot and it was a direct hit. We disabled the Stalin as it wasn't able to turn its turret anymore. The danger was gone now. We also destroyed one of its tracks so we also immobilized it. While driving away I observed two officers of the Luftwaffe committing Fahnenflucht or desertion. I shot at them and ordered them to come back. Both came back and of course, they thought I was going to execute them. Instead, I told them to take a wounded Luftwaffe officer with them – whom we were transporting in our tank – so that they wouldn't come over as cowards. At least they had a legitimate reason to run away from the front line. The thing was that that desertion was severely punished...by hanging. Deserters were executed wherever it was possible to do so. During our retreat we drove through the country and at a certain moment we arrived at a bridge over a wide river. Without hesitating, we crossed the bridge and the moment we just got off the bridge it blew up in one hundred thousand pieces! We continued our way and we arrived at a railroad track. The track was on a slight elevation which of course could cause a problem for our tank. Our Hetzer was a light tank with a light engine so we were not sure if that thing would make it over that steep little hill. We decided to give it a try apart from our driver – of course – we all went to sit in the back of the tank to put some weight on the tracks. Our driver went full throttle and slowly the tank started to climb. Then the moment of truth: would we slide back or would it tip over so we could continue our way? I was so

relieved when it tipped over!

Once on top of the tracks an infantryman tapped on my shoulder and asked me to look back, to the horizon. He handed me his binoculars and when I looked through them, I saw several Russian tanks approaching at about 2 Km of distance. We had to act quickly because we knew that the Russian tanks were a lot stronger than our little Hetzer. We turned around on the train track, backed up a little bit, to finally hide our tank behind the little hill. Only our barrel was sticking out, the rest of the tank was protected by a natural barrier. Systematically we started to fire at the oncoming tanks. First to the left, then to the right, and then in the middle; this way the Russians had no clue that it was only one tank firing at them! If they only knew that only one tank was firing at them, they would've regrouped and concentrated their attack on one tank only. Luckily, we survived this battle and we managed to get away. Then came the day that the German Armed Forces had to surrender to the Allies. I remember that it was on May 8 – 1945 that I heard Karl Dönitz on the radio stating that Hitler was dead and that he was in command now. He also stated that Germany had signed the unconditional surrender. This was it... the end or almost the end. We drove back to our unit, to the location where we all took off earlier in 1945. There we found numerous vehicles that were still intact. Of course, they were all abandoned but they were almost brand new. There we parked our Hetzer and I ordered to put explosive in the barrel and in the engine compartment. I lit up the fuse and I destroyed our tank. From there we continued our journey on foot and I have to tell you that the first day was a living hell. As you know we were a few kilometers from the Russians however we wanted to get to the Canadians. The only problem was that they were 80 Km away from us. We marched day and night and when we finally reached the Canadian lines, we were surprised that they were so friendly to us. They drove by us with their vehicles...waving at us. Then a rumor was spread that the Americans would rearm us so that we could fight together against the Russians. Of course, this never happened. After a while, I took off my uniform and I put on civilian clothes. However, I kept my uniform until I was back in Belgium where I traded it for a pound of tobacco. I "sold" it to a Belgian officer. One pound of tobacco was worth a lot of money at that time! But back to the Canadian line now where we saw all sorts of people there. Soldiers, laborers, and... a few SS men where there. It was not a pretty sight as the SS men were being lynched. We were still with our group of seven soldiers. All Waffen SS! We had to undergo a medical examination and at the infirmary, we saw a placard saying "Delousing tomorrow. Hopefully, we'll get rid of these animals." I knew exactly what was going on and what they meant by it. They were looking for SS soldiers! When you delouse a person, they have to lift their arms... and under the arm, they would find the blood type tattoo if they were dealing with SS soldiers. We all had an ID card – without pictures – so this worked in our advantage to escape the delousing process. I took a couple of cards from other people that were already checked. Then I showed them to a couple of soldiers who were checking prisoners. I was able to speak a little bit of English and I told them I was a Belgian. Without hesitation, they told me to join the other Belgians in the camp. I didn't have to think a minute about this and I called my Flemish friends to come over. First, they hesitated a little bit but then they joined me.

To my surprise, I realized that in the Belgian camp the majority of the people were veterans from the Eastern Front! In the Belgian camp, we were finally fed and we even got tents to sleep in. A couple of days later we were put on trucks to get back to Belgium. After 60 to 80 Km driving, we stopped in another camp where we got checked again under our arms. Don't ask me how but we were able to escape this "check" again and we continued our journey back to Belgium. After spending the night in a camp, we were put back on trucks. I was about to take a seat in the back of the truck when I saw a man who was from my hometown. I think he recognized me but he kept his mouth shut. Good thing that he kept his mouth shut otherwise I would've been imprisoned for sure. Then the trucks drove off and I never saw this man again. We drove for days until we arrived at the Lüneburger Heide. There I saw the farm again where we stayed a couple of months ago during the war. Outside was the farmer's wife doing the laundry and I really hoped, and prayed, that she wouldn't recognize me. At our next stop an English soldier approached me and said that tomorrow we would arrive in Solingen. There would be a huge checkpoint for former members of the Waffen SS. I knew our time had come and we had to act quickly. I told my friend Bob that we had to take action and that we had to get off the truck as soon as possible and run away. On the other side of the street, I saw a bakery. It was close enough to our truck so I asked the English soldier if we could go to the bakery to get some bread. Of course, he said yes and off we went. Inside the bakery, we asked if we could use the outhouse. When we were in the back yard we jumped over the fence into the back alley. From there we started running. We stopped at a bar where we knew the owner from before. He told us to stay in the house for the night as the Polish were still in town and they were a bunch of pigs! So, as we were told, we stayed overnight in the house. The next day the Polish left and we could get back into the town. We stayed in the town for a while and we worked on a farm where we used to stay during the war. At a certain moment, an English company arrived in the town and the peace and quiet were over again. My friend took off but I decided to stay in town. I had nowhere else to go. One day I received a love letter from one of the girls in town. So, at night, when I was in the bar, I started reading the letter out loud. The girl who wrote the letter was there as well and she was utterly offended because I was reading it out loud. She was so offended that the next day she went to the English to tell them that there was a Waffen SS soldier hiding in that house. I was working in the field that day when I saw a jeep approaching. The farmer who was with me in the field told me not to worry. He was so calm and self-confident as if he almost knew that nothing would happen to me. I was taken in custody and searched. My room in the house was searched as well but they couldn't find a thing. Luckily, they never looked behind the door because there were five honor daggers hanging there (SS, SA, Army, Navy, and Luftwaffe). I was transported to Camp Hasefeld. There I was told that if I would be cleared, I could go back to the farm where I was working. The camp didn't even have any barbed wire and things seemed to be really easy going there. The next day after my arrival I was again subjected to a medical examination. The medic who assessed me was attached to the Air Force. He didn't seem to care too much and he let me go without a problem. When I exited the medic's office and English soldier asked me if I already passed the Politische Prüfung. I was a little bit confused and instead of answering yes I answered no. I was taken into a room where a man was sitting behind a desk. He had

a red hat on his head and I'm sure he was an officer. He started asking me questions: "What's your name? When and where were you born? Were you a member of the Hitlerjugend or NSDAP...?" Then he asked me to take my shirt off. I complied and there I stood in front of him half naked. I knew where he was going. Then he said: "Raise your arm." I raised my right arm but I knew he meant my left arm. I knew exactly what he was looking for the "mark" under my left arm. Before I was able to hide the mark with some ointment but this time there was no escape. I raised my left arm and he said: "You are SS!" I said: "No I'm not" when he replied: "Yes you are." This went on for a couple of minutes until I got annoyed by this game. I stood in front of him in perfect attention and I said: "Jawohl, Waffen SS!" He opened the top drawer of his desk and he took a handgun out. He carefully placed it on his desk. I can assure you that I started laughing at him and with him. I told him that he'd probably never seen any action on the battlefield and that he'd never had any bullets flying around his head. I said: "Your little toy gun is not scaring me at all." He put the gun back into the drawer and he called two soldiers into the room. He ordered them to take me to a cell, which they did immediately. After a while, I started feeling hungry so I knocked on the door of my cell. An English "Feldwebel" answered and I told him I was hungry. He brought me a big bowl of oats, bread, and cheese. I finished the bowl of oats in no time and I asked for a second one. The guard asked me why I wanted a second one and I told him that I would keep the bread and cheese in case I would go hungry later on the day. After a couple of days, they brought in a German. He was tall and carrying a big bag. The only thing he could do was to complain about everything and nothing. I asked him from which unit he was and he answered me: "Leibstandarte." He said he had surrendered himself to the Allies and my reply to him was: "Sie sind ein Feigling! – You are a coward!" I stood up and slapped him in his face as hard as I could. He started knocking on the door like crazy calling for the guard. The guard arrived and asked what was going on. The German told him what I did to him. The guard looked at me and asked me if this was true. I told him: "Yes I slapped him in his face because he's a coward. I tried to escape custody and he just surrendered to you so he's a coward! Not far from me they kept Skorzeny. Yes, the Otto Skorzeny! One day I was put on an escort with Skorzeny and the other German soldier to another camp and I can assure you that I looked like a royal escort. When I arrived at the other camp, in Fallingbostel, there I was reunited with some NCOs from my old unit. Again, as a new arrival in a camp, I had to undergo another medical exam. Now I have to tell you that in my wallet I had a picture of my parents, sister, and neighbors, all were taken in my hometown. When I had to go for my medical there were 6 soldiers sitting in the room and one of them also had a red hat on. They asked me about the pictures in my wallet and I showed them. On some of the pictures, there was the writing Dendermonde and Merchtem. These were the locations where they were taken. The officer – with the red hat – opened his wallet and he had a picture in there with the writing "Merchtem" on it. He said he recognized the background on my pictures as he was stationed in Merchtem before. So, because of this I was cleared as not being a German but being a Belgian. I told the officer that I was a Fleming but because of that I received a good beating and I was told that I was a Belgian. When I was identified as a Belgian, I was repatriated to Belgium with the Piron Brigade. We were put on a train from Fallingbostel to Belgium and I have

to tell you that these men from the Piron Brigade – who were also on the train - stole all our belongings. An English soldier saw this happening and he yelled at them to stop their activities immediately. He told them: “Stop doing this, these men are also soldiers!” After this incident, we left for Belgium and we arrived in Schaarbeek. There we were transferred to a prisoner’s camp. After a while, I had to appear in front of a military tribunal and my lawyer told me to be humble, friendly, and repentant. I told him I couldn’t play this game and when I appeared before the courts, I showed no remorse for what I’ve done. I was sentenced to lifetime imprisonment and I was stripped of all my civilian and military rights. After my sentencing, I was transferred to a POW in Beverloo. There I had to reappear before the courts and my sentence was reduced to 20 years, then 10 years, and finally to 5 years. I spent some time in Beverloo until the day I got the word that I was free. I was so happy that I was finally free that I was already drunk before I got home. My entire family was waiting for me and this was the end of my misery. When I was back in my hometown people never took offense about the fact that I was a former member of the Waffen SS. When my father received a notification that I was still alive he immediately sent for my mother who was visiting her mother in another town. He sent my sister to her. When my mother received the news that I was still alive she walked back home with a rosary in her hand, praying for me until she got back home. I was a soldier and I’ve done my duty as a soldier. I don’t have to be ashamed of my actions at all!”



The story of Heinrich

I'm from Heimbach which is a small village in Rhineland-Palatinate (Rheinland-Pfalz), just south of Idar-Oberstein. I had a good life there with my wife and daughter. When the war was raging through Europe, I joined the Waffen SS. I was a member of the 9th SS Panzer Division "Hohenstaufen", the Division which had as symbol a letter "H" with a sword that went through the middle of this letter "H". I was young and I wanted an adventure but at the same time I wanted to belong to the elite. It was my choice to join the Waffen SS. It's still difficult to talk about this period of my life, not only because of the horror that I've seen but because of the many good comrades that I've lost down the way. But most important of all, or maybe the saddest part of this war, was that I never saw my wife and daughter again. My daughter was only two years old when I left home for the Waffen SS. I remember my wife and daughter waiving at me when the train departed. It was our last goodbye.

Where do I start? I received my NCO - infantry training with many others in an old castle in an old German village. On the walls outside the buildings, there were torches burning which gave a mystical effect at night. The flames playing in the wind made dancing shadows on the walls of the buildings. Training was hard for the infantry. We had numerous hours – and then I'm just being humble about it – of drill and warfare tactics.

The instructors were very strict as everything – our uniform, shoes, and equipment – had to be clean at the beginning and at the end of the day. Our instructors taught us well and after our training period, they were utterly proud of us. We were after all the SS or Waffen SS, the elite of Germany, who had sworn allegiance – unconditional loyalty is a better wording for it – to the Führer. If you had at least a little bit of honor within yourself then you would never break that oath of allegiance to our Führer! But it was not only an oath of allegiance to the Führer; it was also unconditional loyalty towards our unit, Division, and Germany. In the training center or camp – whatever you want to call it - we had everything. It was like a small village on its own. The words "Meine Ehre Heißt Treue" that was painted on the wall reminded us every day who we were.

I was an [SS-Scharführer](#), a small unit leader. I had, on my left collar tab, one pip in the middle and two stripes on the bottom. One day after training we got the word that we were leaving to the east. We knew what was in the east: the big Russian Beast, the Bolsheviks! We were going to fight the Reds or the Bolsheviks for the protection of our people and fatherland. We boarded a train, a very long train, which carried lots of men. That thing was almost too small to get us all in with all our equipment. It wasn't the first-class train ride! However, we started moving and I remember it took us days and days to get into the Russian steppes. We had to be careful now as we were in enemy territory. A good thing was that we had some extra weaponry on the train to protect us from aerial or infantry attacks. But for one thing you could never be prepared for: partisans and partisan activities or, like we used to call it, acts of sabotage. When people got caught for acts of sabotage they were shot without questioning. This was the rule. I have absolutely no compassion with partisans as they don't fight according to the rules of war! Every meter that we drove safely on the railroad tracks was a relief but you never knew if the next meter would be the one that would change your life.

I remember that our train had derailed and went on its side. Most likely this was an act of sabotage by partisans. There was no explosion so I presume they tampered with the tracks in some sort of way. There were lots of casualties on our side however we maintained our calm and secured the area. After an intense search in the area, we were able to find 3 men which we suspected they were the ones that caused our train to derail. They were very close to our location and they were very nervous. They had scratches on their hands and bruises so I think they've been busy "doing things." I guess they were all in their early 20's and you could tell they were scared as hell! They were imprisoned, questioned, and then brought behind a tree line by four soldiers. These soldiers had their rifle and machine gun at the ready. When they were out of sight, I could hear several shots being fired. The four soldiers came back, laughing and joking while reloading their weapons. I guess you can figure out yourself what happened to those three kids... There's nothing you could do about it. Orders were orders and they had to be followed. They did what they were told to do too. In this case, execute partisans. When we were ready to go, we had to leave most our equipment behind so we carried what we could carry. The dead comrades were buried not far from the tracks. We made a small cemetery and on each cross, we put a helmet on top. A little plaque was made of some wood from the train to remember whoever would find this place that this was a German cemetery. I never saw that cemetery again but I hope that our comrades were given the honors by whoever found them resting there. May they rest in peace... It's sad to know that so many young lives were gone in a blink of an eye. Some of them were even good friends of mine. Jan, one of my comrades, survived and we continued our way in the endless Russian steppes and then back to Europe after our Russian adventure.

One day we – our little unit that is – were out on a reconnaissance patrol in the woods. I can't remember the exact location but it must have been close to Tarnopol. At the border of the woods, there was a wide-open field with a barbed wire fence running in the middle of it. It was maybe 1 to 1.2m high. We decided to cross the field, go over the

barbed wire, and continue east. It was getting dark so we thought that it would be safe to cross. Even when we thought it would be safe, we were always alert and scanning the horizon for possible enemy activity. While walking through the field all of a sudden, we heard machine gun fire. Where did it come from? I had absolutely no idea. I think they were hiding somewhere in the bushes. We started running to get ourselves into safety. Shots were fired from our end but I don't think it helped a lot. I thought it was more a waste of ammo. While running towards the fence I saw one of my comrades go down. He got hit by a bullet. He was still alive as he was still conscious. How did I know that he was still conscious? Well he was yelling and screaming like hell! While the rest of our unit was running into safety I turned back and went to get my injured comrade. He was a Sturmmann and he looked at me as if he was saying "I don't want to die here today." Jokingly I told him that this wasn't a good day to take a rest in the middle of the fields with all this lead raining down on us! I assured him that I would take care of him and that he didn't have to worry. We didn't have much time as the bullets were flying around us. Men of my unit returned fire in the unknown while I picked him up and I carried him through the field, over the barbed wire fence, into the safety of the woods. I still can't believe that the bullets missed me. I always thought that the Russians just fired at me to scare me as they most likely saw me carrying my comrade over my shoulder. Back into safety, we regrouped and counter attacked our enemies. I made sure the injured Sturmmann was taken care of before I went back to counter-attack. It was a short battle and we wiped them all out. No casualties on our side, except for one injured. I just want to be very clear on one thing: when I say that we wiped "them" out I mean that they were all killed in action. If we had a prisoner of war, we kept him alive. Prisoners would be sent far behind the front line for intelligence purposes. Executions were not allowed, only for partisans, but that's a different story as you already know.

While we continued our way, we arrived at a big barn. The barn was empty and, after clearing the area, we decided to stay there for the night or maybe for a couple of days if things were good. After all, we had to take care of our injured comrade and we could use some rest. In one of the following days, our reinforcements arrived, well if you can call it reinforcements. Now we had a few tanks and half-tracks. One of the men of our company went to the higher-ranked officers and told him what I had done, that I saved one of the guys while under heavy machine gun fire. That night, inside the barn, I was called by a Sturmbannführer to stand next to him. We were standing on a little stairway facing the group of brothers that gathered in front of us. A little ceremony was held and the Sturmbannführer talked about bravery in the field and saving your comrades – better said, putting your own life at risk for your fellow soldier. He said he expected this from each member of the unit, of each member of the Waffen SS. Another officer approached the stairway after the Sturmbannführer gave the "nod". He had a little black box in his hand which he opened when he was standing right in front of the Sturmbannführer. It was the Iron Cross 1st Class! The Sturmbannführer took the cross out of its box and awarded me – in name of the Führer and the unit - with the Iron Cross 1st class. He placed it nicely on my uniform and I kept it there all the time. I never removed it except when I changed uniform. That – receiving the Iron Cross 1st Class - was one of the proudest moments of my life. I still remember it today as if it was yesterday. It was such an honor for me as I knew why I

received it. The Sturmbannführer shook my hand and said to me: “Scharführer, Ich bin stolz auf dich!” which translates “Scharführer, I’m proud of you!” Not a lot later we were involved in heavy fighting and we lost a lot of men and equipment. Our division was literally decimated there in the Tarnopol area. After our major loss in the East, the war went on and we were redeployed in the West. I was happy to leave Russia, I never liked that place, and I hoped not to go back there. In the West, we fought on many different fronts but the Ardennes are that place that stays in my memory forever. We fought in the Ardennes and in the Eifel – somewhere in November/December 1944 - on the border with Germany alongside our comrades of the Division Das Reich and some Wehrmacht units. We were most likely somewhere in the Malmedy – St Vith region. The woods in Belgium and Germany seemed to be even darker than the woods in Russia. They felt so strange and macabre even though it was a familiar place for us. Maybe because we knew the war was coming to an end. At least I knew it was. At some point, you wouldn’t even know if you were in Germany or Belgium. It all looked the same. The first days in the Ardennes/Eifel, while advancing towards enemy positions, were fast and furious. We were advancing with such a speed that we thought we would be in Antwerp in just a couple of days. But our advance got stopped abruptly and slowly we had to pull back. I don’t like to call it to retreat because we were still resisting the advancing enemy armies with such a magnitude that they lost many good men and equipment.

I remember that in the Ardennes/Eifel the enemy fire – and the fighting in general - was a lot heavier there than on the Eastern front. Also, from our part, we were more aggressive in our way of fighting, especially in those first days when the attacks started. Probably it was because now we were fighting close to the border of Germany, or, on German territory. At no cost could the Allies reach Berlin and we had to stop them, no matter what. We fought with the weapons that we could find, or with the weapons that were still available at that time as supplies were getting scarcer. We still had tanks and 88s however the battle was lost for us... Even when we were hitting the Allies very hard with our tanks, artillery, and infantry they did the same to us. The amount of shells that were dropped on our positions is something that goes beyond my imagination. It was clear to me that they – the Allies – wanted to get into Germany at all costs. Try to imagine a rain of fire above your head, hitting everything that is above and beside you. Trees were falling down, there were fires everywhere and bullets were flying all over the place. It was surreal and it seemed to last forever. But you get used to it...and every time you escape death you get that adrenaline rush through your body. Incredible! In response, our MG42 fire was merciless for our opponents. That thing could shoot so many bullets per minute and the barrel was easy to change. When our MG’s opened fire on the Allies everything became “quiet” on the other side. Or they were dead or they were lying down to the ground praying not to get hit by the 8mm!

I remember that one day there was a wave of enemy soldiers attacking our positions. Luckily for us, we had several MG42 and one Tiger tank and we were positioned on a small hill. We dug ourselves in and had small earth bunkers at our disposition which provided safety and cover. When looking at the approaching wave of soldiers it actually

looked like a suicide mission from their part. We were just waiting for them to come closer so we could open fire. They came to us walking with their rifles at the ready and then our Tiger fired one shot towards them. It caused a big explosion in the midst of these approaching soldiers killing several of them. After the Tiger fired its round one of their guys fired a shot and they started running and screaming while shooting their guns and rifles in our direction. I told my men to stand by and to wait for the order to shoot. We kept our Tiger silent to save ammunition because we didn't know if there were enemy tanks close by. We couldn't afford to waste ammunition. They came closer and closer and it was clear that some guys in our unit were getting a bit nervous with this approaching horde of angry soldiers. I'm not sure why they were screaming like crazy during their assault. Maybe because they thought we were going to surrender? Some of these soldiers were killed by landmines that were hidden in front of our positions. Yes, we did a good job securing our little fort! When they came close enough, I gave my men the order to fire. I told them before the attack to be accurate and deadly; "Save your ammunition until you can get a good hit!" When the time had come, we opened fire and these poor guys went down when hit by our rain of bullets. It was very sad to see so many lives wasted but we had no choice. They were storming at us and we knew that they didn't like us! It was a matter of life and death and I'm pretty sure they thought the same. Soon they noticed that we were determined to maintain our positions and that there was no way through. They had to retreat to save what was left of their unit. That was a smart move from their commanding officer; at least he saved some lives that day...the lives of his own men and probably some of ours as well. When they started their retreat, we just fired a couple of rounds in the air just to make sure they wouldn't turn back. My instructions to my men were clear about retreating soldiers: you don't shoot your opponent in the back, only cowards do such things! If you want to make that kill you do it face to face in combat. None of the retreating soldiers were killed or injured by us. We let them go and if we had a POW, we would make sure he got the care and attention he needed. Treat your enemy with respect and you'll accomplish a lot more. Of course, a POW would be searched and interrogated but not like the way we see it in the movies today. That is so wrong and so Hollywood and that's the reason why people don't like us, especially in the US! We never harmed a POW in whatever way! Like I said before, we were soldiers and we had respect for our opponents.

During the battle in the Ardennes/Eifel, we lost numerous men and equipment. I still see men falling down to the ground and not getting up again. I still hear men cry, German and Allies, as they lay wounded on the ground. The comrades that got killed were given a quick burial at the place where they fell, after the battle of course. Yes, we even buried some American soldiers and marked their graves with a helmet and their Erkennungsmarke or dog tag. There was no time for burial ceremonies for the fallen comrades. Everything had to be done quickly as the next battle was already waiting to be fought. When we passed a dead Allied soldier while advancing to a new position, we wouldn't touch them. With that, I mean that we never took their belongings away, except if they had some food or cigarettes on them, or weapons we could use. But we never took any souvenirs as the Allies did to our fallen comrades. War is not about souvenirs...when it's all over you want to forget about it as soon as you can! Taking personal belongings

from the dead, for a souvenir of your tour you've done, is in my eyes a criminal act.

One day, during a heavy artillery attack on our positions, I got hit in the head by shrapnel, which meant the end of the war for me. That piece of shrapnel penetrated my helmet on the left side and hit my head. It is very sad to remember how young some of the guys were when they died on the field of honor. They died for their fatherland and I have the utmost respect for them. It's that ultimate sacrifice that honored them as soldiers. Now they lay to rest in foreign and German soil, together with their comrades with whom they went through a lot of things during their short lives. When I go back to the war cemeteries, I feel reunited with them because they were my family, my brothers.

War is not man's greatest battle; it's the losses you have to deal with that are the battles you can't win. Nothing will be the same again and reality changed for many of us. I was proud to have served with the Waffen SS and I have no regrets for what I have done. To be clear I never killed a civilian or a prisoner of war. I was a soldier! It's a shame how the Waffen SS got such a bad reputation - and brushed off like criminals - while we were just soldiers doing our duty for our Fatherland. We - myself included of course - treated others with respect but with the necessary discipline. Mistreatment of prisoners or civilians was not tolerated in our unit. If a soldier was caught doing such actions, he would've been severely punished! I was a soldier, not a killer, and my honor is still called loyalty towards my unit, division, and country!



The story of Hans

I was born in the US however both my parents were German so technically I was also a German. I'm not going to disclose where I lived back in those days and I hope you understand. I just want to protect my family. In the 1930's I went back to Germany to go back to school. The local college in Stuttgart had a good program for engineering and I was offered to come live and work with family while going to school. As you can see, the reason why I went to Germany had nothing to do with answering the call to join the German Armed Forces. I just happened to be there when Hitler came to power. Like I said I went back to study engineering. In Stuttgart, I lived and worked with a family who ran an engine/machine shop in the city. I graduated somewhere in 1938 with a degree in engineering. As most of you know the economy was growing back in the States, recovering from the depression, but I couldn't find any jobs via correspondence with family back in the States. The same thing in Germany, I wasn't able to find a job there. So, what was my other option? Exactly, the army was hiring. I joined the Heer or Army and was assigned to an armored corps and I was made an officer, a lieutenant to be more specific. Another thing you need to know is that I was a party member and I never kept that as a secret. Some people ask me why I was a party member and I tell them this: it was because I saw what Hitler was doing for the country in regards to the economy and the regaining of lost territory without firing a single shot! The economic improvements that he was making and the return of the lost lands/territories from World War I by peaceful means were very motivating and inspiring to all people of the country. When I joined the army, I honestly never thought he would say anything more than going into one of those countries peacefully and could not imagine that it would ever come to a war. I saw my first action during the invasion of Poland. The Polish army, how courageous they might have fought, was absolutely no match for the German Army. I said it back then and I'm saying it again, our equipment in those days was so updated and modern compared to the outdated Polish equipment that they had absolutely no chance. Honestly, I thought that the invasion of Poland would be the end of the war and it never came up in me that one day we would attack Russia. However, with Britain and France declaring the war to Germany, I knew that it was possible that a second world war was started. And in war anything is possible. I prayed really hard that the United States wouldn't get involved in the conflict

because chances existed that I had to face classmates and/or family on the battlefield.

It was the faith of almost every German soldier to do a tour on the Russian front during the war. My panzer corps unit was involved in very heavy fighting against the Russians and their numbers were decimated. Things went pretty well for us in Russia and at a certain moment, I was reassigned to another unit. In fact, I was offered to join the Waffen SS. Because I was of pure German descent, and because I was a party member as well, I was offered to join the SS Panzer Division in his area.



Totenkopf Division members in Russia – source unknown

They were also under the command of the same general and staff I was already under. I accepted the offer and I accepted to join the Waffen SS, to be more precise the 3rd SS Panzer Division Totenkopf. I stayed with them till the end of the war and I was promoted to captain after the fighting in the “pocket” – Demjansk Kessel - where I was one of only 50 surviving soldiers. Times were hard at the Russian front, especially after being there for a while. I was, and still, am, anti-communist, and I saw absolutely no use for the Russians. I can tell you that the cold was one of your worst enemies in Russia, besides the hailstorm of bullets and artillery. It still makes me shiver on cold on cold nights. But, as I said, I was very happy to fight the Russians. The other horror of the Russian front was losing so many men during certain engagements. Now I have to say that it was certainly not the quality either the Russians or any of the Allied forces that overcame the German army. It was the quantity. It still shocks me today on how the Russian or Allied commanders would throw people into reinforced and hardened positions in waves upon waves only to die and wear down slowly the Germans. History books never mention this!

I was awarded my first Iron Cross during an engagement where we were near to being overrun by the Russians on one part of a front. My tank ran over a mine and disabled the tracks. The damage to the tank left it stranded in an exposed area. I ordered my crew to abandon the vehicle and take cover in a nearby ditch with the infantry. It became obvious that without the gun and the tank that the infantry positions were in danger of being overran. The tank was taking heavy fire from the Russians as they were

not aware that the crew had abandoned it and the tank was partially on fire. I knew something had to be done and I left the ditch and got back inside the tank. Many parts of the tank were damaged however I was able to load the gun breech, adjust the turret, and aim the gun at the wave of Russians. I fired multiple shots which stopped the Russian firestorm. Many of the attacking Russians were killed that day. Remember, my tank was on fire so I had to abandon it at a certain point. I ran back to the ditch for cover with the infantry. The unexpected bursts in the tank killed many Russians and briefly slowed down their advancement. When it was obvious that they were regrouping and making another assault I saw that the only thing that could possibly slow them down again would be a verse from the tank. I ran back to the tank, climbed in it, loaded around, made the adjustments and fired multiple rounds before abandoning the tank one more time. I fired another total of 6 rounds. For this action, I was credited with saving all of the men in the infantry unit and my crew from an overwhelming enemy force. This was my Iron Cross! It was not my first award because while I was with the Heer, I earned a War Merit Cross 2nd class. I won my second Iron Cross within a couple of weeks from this incident for actions near Lushno on 27 September 1941, for knocking out multiple T34 tanks by tank and on foot with Panzerfausts and explosive charges. I also led the assault that helped take that town from the Russians. There I was also wounded when I abandoned my tank after it was hit. I also lost two crew members. People often ask me if I had any idea about the activities that went on in the camps. Well, my answer is simple: No, I didn't know. For me, the war was a noble and righteous cause. The only atrocities I can recall are the loss of so many good men fighting the barbarism of the Communists. One time I saw several men that have been hung from a tree with signs around their necks. They were Russians who had murdered German POWs during a battle. The Russians saw that the tide was turning and that they would be overrun by the Germans. Therefore, they killed all POWs. Our Army caught these Russians almost immediately after their act of barbarism. They were given no quarter and hung as an example. These were barbarians with no honor!

Toward the end of the war, we were looking for the Americans to surrender to and dodging the Russians. We located a patrol from the American 3rd Army and offered to negotiate a surrender. The patrol took a group of officers back to their Command Post; I was one of them. I was picked by my superiors to talk to the Americans because I was American born and spoke flawless English. After all, I graduated high school here in the States. They thought I was probably the best man who could communicate best with the Americans. They also hoped that it would be a plus so that we wouldn't be turned over to the Russians. One of the GIs had a strong Boston accent and they were making fun of the Germans assuming they spoke little or no English. Once at the Command Post we were turned over to a group of officers and the GIs were walking away. I turned and in perfect English - with an NC accent - asked how the Red Socks were doing. The GI dropped his cigarette. It was such a funny moment! During negotiations, the Americans requested that we disarm a nearby camp's guards. Our request was only to not be turned over to the Russian forces in the area. At one point an officer asked me where he studied English and commented on mine being so flawless. I replied: "in western NC where I grew up." All the American officers immediately looked at me and then one of their own, a captain, looked at me and asked me what part of NC I was from. I replied to his question and after

a short exchange of questions, we realized we grew up only one county apart and had actually played high school basketball against each other. The negotiations ended and we surrendered with the only the requirement that we disarm the guards at the nearby camp. I think it was the camp of Mauthausen. I never went to a camp before and I thought they were only labor camps. I was shocked by the amount of dead there and the conditions people had to live in. This really hurt my honor and it certainly took away my national pride. After the guards were disarmed and a final roll call was made by the 3rd SS command, the Americans picked out four members from the 3rd SS to retain as interpreters and advisors. The rest were promptly turned over to the Russians. The GIs were really upset about the camp and saw the fear of the Russians in the Germans and decided the Germans deserved it. The camp guards were mostly killed by the Russians. The majority of the 3rd that was taken by the Russians died in captivity. The captain who knew me made sure I was among those detained by the US 3rd Army. I was later interned at a US POW camp for little under a year. Upon release I went back to Stuttgart and helped the family, those that were still there, rebuilt their homes and business. It was also there where I married my sweetheart. Within a year I was able to get back to the States and I settled on family land. I got a job and worked until I retired.

I never made a big deal out of my time with the Waffen SS and only upon asking would I would ever talk about it. I was prouder of my job after the war. When I do talk of my war days, I'm always proud to speak about the tanks that I used and my men, the most loyal and brave men I've ever known! From Stuttgart, I made my way back to the States. Everything from World War II was packed away in a cedar chest and left in the back corner of a closet. The family here did a really good job actually to keep any knowledge of my affiliation during World War II a deep family secret. People at home only knew that I went to study engineering abroad and that was the end of that. Then there are my brothers at arms from the war. They are and will remain, family and our loyalty to each other remains forever.

I still remember the day that I heard that Germany declared war on the United States and that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. It really sickened me to think that some of my classmates were possibly in the ships destroyed and then the idea that I might find myself in the situation of fighting Americans hit me like a ton of bricks. That had never before entered my mind and it made me nearly physically sick. Some of my men asked me about how I felt and of course, I had to hide my fears. I had no problems fighting the "Bolsheviks" but I never considered fighting Americans. It took me weeks to put the thoughts out of my head and control my sickness from it. Then when I heard that the Americans were in France, I was still fighting very hard against the Russians. Although I realized what it might mean: probably someday I had to fight the Americans but there was not the time to dwell on such. Just before I surrendered, I had been told the Americans were getting closer and again I became nearly physically ill. The greatest blessing of the war was that when I came home, I knew that I had not spilled an ounce of American blood! America was and still is my home and I never fought one single American soldier. I'm a proud American who fought very hard with my men during the war and that is it!

Note: The name of the soldier was withheld by the author out of respect for the family of

the soldier. The soldier was a very honorable man, during and after the war, and has done great things for his community where he lived in the US. His passing was a great loss for his family and for the town where he lived.



The story of Karl Matter

My grandfather, *Rottenführer* Karl Matter was part of the third battle of Kharkov in Papa Hausser's Panzerkorps. As you may know, Hausser disobeyed Hitler's orders to hold the city during its encirclement. They would surely have been annihilated otherwise. The story of what happened there that was passed down in my family and left quite an impression on me as well as it defies the "official" Soviet account that modern historians tend to reiterate.

It was a story that my father told me when I was a young man and one that my Grandmother recently rekindled. So, I'll share it with you as she described it. In addition, I have a wallet size photo of him that was taken in the city with "*Kharkov*" written on the back (spelled the way they pronounced it) as well as a photo of his credentials, so you know who's writing this.



Karl Matter – courtesy of Ray Matter

The way that I re-discovered the story regarding his stay in Kharkov was from my Grandmother and it began as an amusing exchange over the ingredients of a meal with a

friend. My grandmother used to cook stuffed peppers in a tomato sauce with sour cream. One evening I mistakenly referred to the dish as being a German one to a Ukrainian girl here in New York, who cooked that very same meal for me and she was adamant that it was always a Ukrainian dish. So, I introduced her to my Grandmother, who when she found out that my friend was a Ukrainian, gave her a big hug and a kiss. “Your Grandfather used to talk about the Ukrainian girls all the time about how nice they were and how they always helped to cook and do laundry for your Grandfathers friends in Kharkov.” She explained that they couldn’t have survived without them. I was hysterically amused by the story and by my Grandmothers very carefree and simplistic approach in describing her husband’s wartime fondness for Ukrainian girls and their apparent fondness for German soldiers. She also made it very clear that he and his friends held the residents of the city in high regard and expressed to her that he cared a great deal for them, “like family”. It was at that point that I realized that I’d lost my bet with my friend over the source of her cooking. “*Oh no,*” my Grandmother said, “Your grandfather taught me how to cook stuffed peppers with sour cream. He learned it from the Ukrainian girls! They taught him a lot of things.” So, my grandmother shared the recipe with my friend who was perplexed as to how exacting it was to her family’s recipe back in Ukraine. My grandmother then went on to explain a story that my father also used to tell me, though in greater detail regarding his feelings for the population. She explained that when they left Kharkov (presumably during Paul Hausser’s famous retreat maneuver), the Waffen SS left behind as many small arms and grenades (“bombs” she called them) as they possibly could. She explained how emotionally distraught my Grandfather was, that they didn’t have permission to evacuate the civilian population during the Soviet encirclement of Kharkov, so their only solution was to quickly arm every able man and woman, with as many spare weapons that they could afford, including their own personal side arms. I remember my Grandmother becoming very emotional as she went on about it and with my knowledge of the famous Third battle for Kharkov, I knew what was coming. She said that they were surrounded, were ordered to leave and later re-took the city. “When they returned, they found they were all killed!” She hollered. “The Russians killed all the girls! Everybody! Your Grandfather was very upset and he never forgot it. My god, what he told me I can never repeat it. I can never tell you.” At this point, I didn’t ask though. I’ll never forget that by her reaction that he must have described the aftermath vividly to her. She had tears in her eyes telling me the story, feeling her husband’s pain.



Picture of Karl Matter – Kharkov 1942-43. Courtesy of Ray Matter.

The way that the battle was played out, was that in January of 1943 the Soviets committed about 6 million troops to that area alone in the Voronezh Kharkov Offensive. By the middle of February, Kharkov was completely encircled with only a small corridor left for any possibility of escape. It was on February 14th that Paul “Papa” Hausser was ordered by Hitler to stay and hold the city at all costs. As quickly as Hausser received that order, he ordered a tactical withdrawal of the SS Panzerkorps from the city, being the first SS General to disobey an order from Hitler in the field. After a successful regrouping, within a few weeks and despite further orders from Manstein for the SS Panzerkorps to encircle the city from the North, Papa Hausser took it upon himself to attack Kharkov head on and successfully retook the city on March 15th. It was that maneuver that created the salient that made operation Citadel possible, arguably slowing the Soviet advance to Germany by another 6 months. Needless to say, that Hausser was never punished for successfully acting independently.

The story of the battles of Kharkov are quite famous, unfortunately, history has chosen to ignore the price paid by the civilian population of Kharkov at the hands of the Soviets.

My grandfather’s division also fought on the Hungarian border before surrendering to US forces. They fought a narrow line between the Soviets and the US and surrendered to the US side after running out of ammunition on May 9th, 1 day after the war was over. His Division, including others of about 20,000 men were held in an open field compound outside of Linz Austria (likely at Gallneukirchen). It was a large muddy compound. You may have seen similar pictures. What happened in the field is a story that I was told by my father and grandmother as a young man that I’ll never forget and it was almost a decade before James Bacques book “Other Losses”. They were in a muddy field with no tents, no food, and no clothing, packed together for a week living in their own feces, surrounded by an enormous circle wall of hundreds of US vehicles, and thousands of men. Once in a while for fun, a US guard would target practice on indiscriminate prisoners. That’s a common event I later learned, especially because many US soldiers never had the opportunity to claim a kill until after the war. After a few days, they began drinking their own urine and eating leather. The part that sticks in my mind that I’ll never forget because of how angry it made my grandfather, is that after 1 week of no food, a US transport plane flew over the compound of emaciated POW’s and dropped large Red Cross packages of butter and nothing else. Just pure butter. The story goes that my grandfather didn’t eat it and survived. Those that did, it killed them because it greased their insides out and caused them to lose whatever fluids in their bodies that they had left with diarrhea. So, as it was described to me, he refused to eat it but they lost a lot of guys that way. Then the following day, transport flew over again and dropped the Bread. That’s where the story ends. The significance is that they were refused food for one week. I later learned from research that local civilians were under strict orders not to feed them, or they would be shot. The fact of the butter story confirmed to me that it was a cruel joke and that provisions were intentionally withheld for vengeance no different than the guards taking pot shots for fun. His entire Division after this, which consisted of German Reich born and

Baltic born countries was then handed over to the Russians, who executed them all within hearing distance of the US military who transported them back over the border. My Grandfather's *Soldbuch* said he was born in Yugoslavia, which made him the property of Tito and not the Russians. He was sent to labor and due to an illness was unable to continue working, so he was eventually reunited with his family through the Red Cross after one or two years. According to my grandfather's story as I understand it, after suffering in this massive, muddy POW compound surrounded by armored vehicles and thousands of men, with no food (which is a detailed story in itself including torture and random shootings by guards), the 3rd SS was separated between those who were either Reich born or born in Soviet-occupied territory and those who were Balkan born, who would therefore be property of Tito.

He was lucky to have retained his *Soldbuch*, which indicated that he was born in Yugoslavia in 1920, so he stayed. Per my grandfather, shortly after the men were escorted out of camp and over a bridge, they heard shots fired and automatically assumed they were all executed. This is how my family understood it for decades; that the Americans handed them over to the Soviets and executions took place. It was years later that I discovered from these eyewitnesses accounts, that it was initially the American escort doing the shooting. Additional details on the event that I had later discovered: after surrendering to the US 11th Armored Division, Third Army, at Linz in May 1945, the members of the division were marched to Pregarten where they were turned over to the Soviets. The senior officers were executed by the NKVD; others were also executed as they were shipped to Siberia. Only a few of them survived captivity to return to Germany.”



The story of Konrad

Konrad – real name withheld - was a member of the “*Der Führer*” Regiment of the 2nd SS Panzer Division *Das Reich*. Konrad’s family was from in Prussia but moved to Berlin after WWI. His father was a member of the Kaisers Guard Regiment and served in WWI. Konrad was born in Berlin, in a place better known as *Friedrichshain*. Following in his father’s tradition, Konrad sought to carry on the tradition by joining an elite regiment. In 1940, after talking to a co-worker who recently joined the Waffen-SS “*Polizei Regiment*” (later the 4th SS *Polizei Division*) Konrad wanted to join as well. At the time, the new elite regiments in Germany were those of the Waffen SS. Konrad, growing up as a product of National Socialism, sought enlistment in one of those regiments. At this time, there was a call for Germans in Konrad’s age group to become long service volunteers to a state-run organization, either a workgroup (such as the RAD) or part of the Wehrmacht. After obtaining permission from his father, Konrad, who was only 16 years old at the time, tried out to become a member of the “*Der Führer*” Regiment. He was one of approximately 500 recruits who was enlisting to be a member of this unit. At this time, membership in the Waffen-SS was very strict and was still based according to the (racial) policies of the Waffen SS. Only 40 out of the 500 were accepted from his recruitment pool. Konrad finished his basic *Schütze* training in Radolfzell (Germany) and was then sent to the Netherlands to join the “*Der Führer*” Regiment. Konrad was assigned to the Combat “*Pionier*” Platoon, which, at that time, consisted of a sergeant, a lance corporal, and eight other men. All of them were combat veterans with over two years of service. Konrad was one of the youngest recruits in the regiment at that time and his training did not get easier. In fact, it became harder once he reported to his unit. In June 1941, Konrad and the rest of the regiment were stationed in a large manor near Lodz, Poland. The rumors of an invasion of Russia soon became reality as they were briefed on what Russian uniforms, tanks, and equipment looked like. He believed they were about to embark on a campaign that would take them to Persia and India. He felt apprehensive since his uncle was captured on the Eastern Front in WWI and did not make it home until 1921. After Operation Barbarossa began, Konrad admitted that he and his comrades were very much surprised at how much better Russian equipment was than theirs. In July Konrad was promoted *SS Sturmman* and shortly thereafter he sustained his

first combat injury. While engaged in a fight against the Soviets a mortar round landed nearby and he received minor shrapnel wounds to his face. In December, of the same year, Konrad sustained another injury. This time it was shrapnel from an artillery round that hit him behind his right knee. This injury leads Konrad to leave the front and he was sent back to Poland. Konrad noted that at this time the weather was getting colder. It took him ten days to get from the field station to a hospital in Smolensk, Russia. By this time his wound became infected and there were no medical supplies on hand to help, just some brandy to drink. After arriving in a military hospital outside of Warsaw, the medical staff stripped Konrad from his uniform and gave him a bath. This was the first time he shaved and washed up since October and the first time his clothing was replaced!

In January 1942, Konrad was discharged with 28 days leave to go home to Berlin to visit his family. When Konrad returned to the Waffen SS Replacement and Training Battalion after leave, he was still found not fit for front line duty, therefore, he was assigned to work in the weapon repair shop and as a part-time *Sturmpionier* instructor. After returning to his division, Konrad served with the “*Der Führer*” Regiment throughout 1942. In February 1943, Konrad received word that his father passed away and was sent home immediately to attend the funeral. Konrad noted that his superiors in his unit, upon notice of his father’s death, immediately pulled him from the front lines and sent him home. Konrad believed that the food rations and bombing raids on the German cities lead to his father’s early death. The night prior to his father’s death, he had a dream that his father was at the doorway of his bunker in Russia. In late 1943 he was injured for the third time. On the hospital train back to Poland, Russian partisans ambushed the train and killed several patients, however, the train managed to continued onto the rear to a Luftwaffe hospital where he was treated for his wounds.



Soldiers of Das Reich – Courtesy of the Bundesarchiv

In January 1944 Konrad visited his mother, who was now living alone in Berlin. By this time, the city was being devastated by air raids and Konrad helped his mother move out to relatives in Silesia. After his medical leave, Konrad reported to a hospital, where, after treatment and examination he was pronounced fit for duty. However, the Waffen SS ordered him to report to officer training in Josefstadt in Sudetenland. Konrad was chosen to become a Panzer Grenadier Platoon Leader in the 2nd SS Division. Somehow Konrad managed to turn down this promotion and was sent back to his unit as a grenadier. In July 1944, Konrad finally reported back to the 2nd SS Division, which was

already heavily engaged in the Normandy campaign. It must be known that when the war began all men who were with the Waffen SS were supposed to be the best in Germany. A soldier had to go through a lot to make it into the ranks. However, as the war progressed Konrad's unit started to get men who no longer volunteered but were mostly drafted or transferred in from another service, such as the Navy or Luftwaffe. In 1943, the unit received a large number of recruits from Alsace-Lorraine area, as well as from Strasburg and the Vogesen. These men spoke German and French. They tried to keep the 1st companies staffed by German veterans and usually placed these new recruits in secondary or third companies and sometimes in support battalions as well. Konrad's unit just felt it was better to get experienced men up in the units that usually went into action first. During the retreat towards the Seine River in August, Konrad and another comrade became lost for a few days and ended up behind British lines. Figuring there was no hope of getting back to their unit, they surrendered to a British Medic. Konrad saw the Red Cross armband on the medic and therefore he felt that he would get safe treatment. However, this was with mixed feeling as the Red Cross armband was not respected on the Eastern Front. After surrendering to the medic, he observed that the British were very nervous about them being Waffen SS. They kept a Sten gun pointed at the back of their heads the whole time. After arriving at a POW collection point, Konrad was well treated and even given tea with milk and sugar! He ended up being transported to England and serving in a British POW camp from where he eventually was released in 1948. His mother was sent to a Russian concentration camp after the war because she had a picture of him in his Waffen SS uniform. She perished before he could get back home. Konrad had one final thought he wanted to share. After all, he has been through in WWII, he would never wish that his grandson or anyone's son would ever have to experience a war. He would do everything in his power to prevent his grandchildren from fighting in a war!



The story of Horst

Horst is a veteran of 12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend. Horst was born in March 1926 outside the town of Stettin which was in Prussia, Pomerania (Eastern Germany). He attended public School, junior college and then the Adolf Hitler School (NAPOLA) Military Academy in Bad Tölz, Prague, and Berlin-Lichterfelde. He graduated in 1943 and

began training in Sennelager (Paderborn) on Panthers and later on the Tiger II - better known as the "*Königtiger*." Horst's first action was in Ploesti against Russian T-34's and then in the Battle of the Bulge. He regrouped in Sennelager and was sent to Hungary and fought in Stuhlweissenburg and later the battle of Budapest. He fought his last battle against General Patton's 3rd Army in Czechoslovakia. He survived the war and was in a prison camp until 1946 and moved to the United States in 1956.

It all began when the day finally came when he received his *Stellungsbefehl* or draft orders. He had been accepted in the SS Armour Units and was to report at once to Paderborn *Sennelager*. It was being said that God created the training camp at Paderborn in a mad moment. On the way to the training camp, in the train, soldiers were asked, where he was going. He told them and they replied that he would be sorry. He smiled back at them with the thought about what could happen to him at the camp. It couldn't be that hard as he went from the Adolf Hitler School to the Hitlerjugend and then to preliminary training. The recruits were all 17 years old and at the arrival at the camp, two NCOs picked them up. They were a group of 75 recruits ready to start training. As soon as they came to the gate, all hell broke loose. "*You idiots, you assholes!*" were the nicer words they used on the new recruits. All new recruits had to crawl with their suitcases through the gate. After they got squared away, they asked the instructors when it was time for them to eat. It was 4 o'clock in the afternoon and they were sorry they asked that question. The drill sergeant described their reason to live with military finesse and it was around 8 o'clock that night that they got our first meal. After that, it was time to go to bed. On day two, at 6 o'clock the new recruits were woken up - not very gentle as you can imagine - using the whistle and other noisemakers. Horst remembers that they almost fell out of bed. They did not have a canteen at their disposition so two men were selected to go get coffee and the morning ration of bread and jelly and bring it back to the barracks as soon as possible. After breakfast, everybody fell out to get their uniforms and gear. Each recruit was given three complete uniforms: a camouflage uniform, a grey uniform, and a black Panzer uniform. The black uniform had to be put away in their locker as they were not allowed to touch it! Then the day started with marching and drill practice. At lunchtime they were given bean soup, 3 boiled potatoes, and a piece of bread. All recruits had a metal bowl for our soup but since they did not have canteen, they had to find a place where they could eat. Imagine, one bowl of soup, 3 potatoes and a piece of bread, and only had two hands to carry all of this. If you dropped one or the other, the drill sergeant would compliment you with the nicest words in the German language with the question: "*You don't want the food? Go dump the rest next to it!*" In the afternoon all recruits had classes about weapons, tactics, and Nazi doctrine. At 6 o'clock the day was over as far as classes were concerned. Between 6 o'clock and 10 o'clock, recruits were not allowed to go near their bed or leave the barrack. At 10 o'clock it was "lights out!"

In the early war years in Russia, riding on tanks for infantrymen was good because of the long distances the infantry had to travel. But in 1944 in the West, nobody wanted to ride on our tanks anymore, because of the air being completely taken over by the Allied air forces. When there was a chance you could get 15 to 20 men on a Tiger II, and on a Panther about 15. The Russian tanks were more in the role of infantry support. They had

handrails welded on their tanks, mostly on the KV1 and KV2, not so much on a T-34. Most of the infantry didn't want to ride on "that death trap".



Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-297-1726-17
Foto: Kurth | 1943/1944

Waffen SS Hitlerjugend troops in 1944 – Courtesy of the Bundesarchiv

Not only was there the air superiority of the Allies that made the life of a Panzer crew more difficult. There was also the issue of clean clothes. Imagine you were in the field fighting. All your (extra) gear was 100 kilometers behind you and you only had one uniform with you, that is, of course, the one you were wearing. To clean your clothes, you had to find some water, dip your clothes in it and hope the lice would drown. You had no other option to run around naked or half naked until your uniform was dry again. Or, if you were in possession of a spare uniform – if you were that lucky – you'd dump your old uniform and put on the new one. A Panzer crew had it better. After the battle, they always came back to their HQ or supply point where there were ammo, gas, food, and clothes!



The story of Guschtie

I'm from Mulhouse, France, but the Germans called this city Mülhouse. It was the main city in the Alsace region, which was French territory at the time. The Alsace is the region between the Vosges and the Rhine River – the border with Germany. My wife's family were inn-keepers and we lived over the inn. The Germans came in 1940 but it didn't matter too much because this type of thing happened every so often here in the region. One day the region was Germany, then France again, then Germany again. My son was born in November 1941 but the Germans made us give him a German name. My wife wanted to name him after her father Gerard but we had to name him Bernhard.

While I was working hard in the factory, my wife was messing around with the German officers who came into the inn. One day I came home and one was sitting in my parlor chatting to my wife. Nothing wrong with that one would think. Then I went into my bedroom to get changed and found his cursed hat on my wardrobe! I went into the kitchen and threw it into the wood-stove, then ran out the door. He, the officer, was walking down the stairs towards the inn. I attacked him and pounded him to a pulp (gefügig machen). Next morning, they arrested me and threw me in jail. This happened in January of 1943. In March or April, while sitting in my cell, I saw this Waffen SS officer looking into the cells. He walked into my cell and he looked at me and smiled. I was 180 centimeters tall (about 5' 11"), blonde hair, blue eyes, and pretty muscular. Just what they wanted! He looked magnificent too, with a leather coat and a sharp uniform and gloves. He said: "would you like to get out of here?" Of course, I said "yes!" Then he told me he could get me out to join the Waffen SS as the jail was no place for a strong German man. He asked me if I would fight the Bolsheviks and of course, I said yes. I just wanted to get out of there, out of jail that is. The next thing I know was that I was off to a camp near Prague in Czechoslovakia.

Once, during training, we were having an inspection and one of my tunic pocket buttons was not sewn on tightly to my uniform. It was hanging down by just a thread. Those buttons were never sewn on tight enough so you had to readjust it yourself. The Oberscharführer came up to me and said, "You are not in order." I replied that I didn't think that one little thing really mattered. He yelled at me "Think? You are not supposed to think! We leave the thinking to the horses because their heads are larger than yours!" After training, I went to the Ostfront or Eastern Front. I was in the 3rd Kompanie,

Deutschland Regiment of 2nd SS Division. The name of the division was "Das Reich." That winter in 1943 the "Ivans" were killing lots of our men, just one after the other. We were really getting pounded. The weather was bad as well so that was another factor that didn't work in our favor. Suddenly they began to transfer a lot of people from our division back to France for a vacation. But not us, not the Alsatians. They said it was because we had not been there as long as some of the others, but we knew it was because we were Alsatian. They took the Germans out and left the Alsatians, the Czechs, etc at the front to fight.

I remember that there was a major offensive from the Russians one day. The Red Army scattered us all over the place. I threw away my pistol and equipment and hid in the freezing water under a bridge. The Russians marched over the bridge and when they were gone, I came out and headed for safety. Then big shells started coming down, exploding all around me! I thought that this would be the end for me. Then a Panzer stopped and a guy waves me over and told me to get in. I got in but at that moment the Panzer got hit by enemy fire. I sustained very bad injuries out of that: my whole side and one leg were all torn up. The Panzer crew pulled me out and took me to the closest Hospital. After having received the first medical care I went right back to Prague in Czechoslovakia, almost the same place where it all started for me. Close to the end, they moved all the patients to a camp in Austria. When the war ended, I was still in the camp in Austria. I was hobbling around outside on my crutches when the French army came into the camp. A tank pulls up, the hatch opens and a man comes up. He says in Alsatian: "Gustav, is that you?" It was my sister's boyfriend André who was with the French Army. He recognized me but I did not recognize him at that time. In some kind of way, he knew where to find me. He took me to his commander who told me: "What the devil do you think you are doing in the SS? Keep your mouth shut or you might regret it." Then they sent me straight home. I was lucky because some men spent a long time in French prisons. When I got back to my home town, the inn where I lived was in ruins and my relatives were living in the cellar. It was very wet and cold there. My son had died of a lung infection because of the living conditions during the war. My wife was gone. She wasn't dead but she had gone to Germany before the Allies arrived. I didn't know any of this, because I hadn't gotten any mail after the liberation. I tried to find my wife for years after the war but it wasn't easy. There was a Suchdienst in Bonn who would help you find missing people but we never found her. This made it very difficult to get a divorce. I think she may have died in Berlin in 1945. I was so depressed because everything was ruined. I had to keep quiet about what I had done during the war. But my grandmother always said, "Kopf Vor! (keep your head up) You can get through almost anything." We, as foreigners in the Waffen SS, were treated about the same as anyone else in the Waffen SS. There were a lot of non-Reich born men in the Waffen SS. Ok, sometimes they criticized our dialect. I don't have any trouble understanding German, but sometimes it's hard to speak it like a German. I felt sorry for some of the Czechs, some of them spoke better German than I did but some of them could barely understand what you said to them. For some reason the Germans thought that the Czechs made better soldiers than the Alsatians; they were likely to promote them first. You would meet Army troops and they would say: "Oh no! The Waffen SS has got the Alsatians! Good! Keep them because we don't want

them!” Sometimes we were sitting behind cover after managing to stay alive after heavy fighting with the Ivans when an NCO would come up and yell “Get up, you “Faule Hunde” or lazy dogs! Get to work! Build positions!” That’s what they would call us - Faule Hunde. But during the war, we had our funny moments as well. I remember that there was this soldier named Gaenzenbittel who was always hungry. One time he came into our shelter begging for food. I said “Wait a minute. I have some hot sauce made of beets and horseradish.” I gave him a slice of bread with a thick layer of “sauce” on it. Gaenzenbittel, without hesitation, just ate that piece of bread as fast as he could. The look on his face was priceless as if he swallowed a grenade! He was running around yelling “Wasser!” Somebody handed him a glass of vodka which he poured down his throat without even thinking. Then he passed out. When he woke up, he says “Guschtie, what did you want to do? Kill me?” We laughed so hard that day! A bit later we had a gasmask inspection. Some men threw their masks away and put their papers in the can because it was waterproof. Before an inspection, the soldiers who had thrown their masks away would find one to borrow in another company who was not having an inspection. But I never threw mine away. While everyone was running around to find a mask, I would rest. We were in formation and the Scharführer gives me the command for the inspection of my gasmask. I whipped my can around and popped the lid. The Scharführer reaches in and pulls out a pair of ladies’ underwear! Huge ones, big enough for a cow! He was standing there with the underwear waving in the breeze. Gaenzenbittel pinched my mask earlier that day and replaced it with that big piece of ladies’ underwear. This was not funny to the commanders of our unit but even the Scharführer looked like he was going to laugh. When the inspection was over, we got some extra work. We had to dig holes for Panzers...



Waffen SS tank commander – source unknown



The story of Karl

Like many things in life, it was not planned. During the fifth year of Gymnasium, male students had to pick one of the services to be inducted into. I chose the Kriegsmarine. They took me to Hamburg and gave me a ride in a U-Boat and a minesweeper. A little while after that I was sleeping on the couch in my family's home in Upper Silesia when my father wakes me up saying: "Karl! They are coming to arrest you!" He had seen an SS man walking up our walkway, but they were only coming to take me to the induction physical! This NCO and 3 others escorted 22 of us to our examination. After graduation, I reported in Breslau. This was in June of 1944...First I had basic training, then NCO school, then officer school. The whole process took 5½ months. Early in the war, it took 2 years to become an SS officer, and the older officers never let us forget it. But late in the war, it was made much faster. Basic training lasted about a month, maybe a little longer. About 2 or 3 months into the schools I went to the front for my "Zwischen-Prüfung". This is where you went to the front to prove that you had the right stuff. You were supposed to go for 6 weeks, but I stayed for only 3. I got training for armored officers in Posen-Treskow. After a total of 5½ months, I bought my first set of shoulder-boards; they cost me exactly 2 Marks and 80 Pfennig. My commanding officer presented them to me. When I was at the Panzer school in Posen, we learned to drive tanks in this Tiger tank that had no "Turm" or turret. Our instructor was this mean Hauptsturmführer who was missing an arm. We called him the "one-armed bandit". He had five tank destruction strips on his sleeve. Many of the instructors were invalids, but they were good instructors. Anyways, he had this metal sign on a stick that was used to signal vehicles in the column. The Hauptsturmführer would use this to whack us on the legs as we drove. "Turn!" WHACK! He was mean. Well, there was this bridge that was just wide enough for a tank with quicksand on both sides. We were approaching this bridge, and I was just going to pull the Hebel or handle to make the left turn to get on the bridge. But the one-armed bandit wacked my knees with that sign and yelled: "Right turn!" When I didn't, he hit me again - "Right turn, that's an order!!" So, I pull the right Hebel and the tank goes into the quicksand and started sinking fast. We students all got out but the one-armed bandit couldn't. Nobody liked this guy, we thought about letting him go down with the Panzer. But I threw him my belt and he grabbed it. I held onto a root or something with one hand and pulled up with the belt. We all walked back into camp covered with this green slime, but all walked behind him so they would see his mess

first. He never said a word to me because he knew it was his fault. They had to use this big crane to get the Panzer out. We had another instructor who was a big healthy guy with no decorations. He must have had pull because any officer from the front would at least have the Iron Cross Second Class. He was our instructor for Judo and Polizeigriffe (Police holds). Like I mentioned before, most of our instructors were decorated invalids. I went to the Ostfront or Eastern front at the end of 1944 and joined the 3rd SS Panzers, I was in the Panzer Jäger. We were equipped with Panzers that had no Turm (turret). Our Divisional name was "Totenkopf"; this was from our emblem which was the traditional emblem of the German Cavalry. Ah! History has us as criminals, but we were not criminals, we were soldiers! At the end of the war we tried to surrender to the Americans, but as I was crossing a beet field, I was heavily wounded. The Americans picked me up and took me to the Russians and dumped me off. I was in Stalin's prisons for a long time. During the war we didn't have time to pick up souvenirs, we were too busy fighting! We did use some Russian equipment of course. After our tank-destroyers ran out of gas, I took over a Battalion Infantry Platoon. These groups were made from tank-destroyer men with no tank-destroyers, tankmen with no tanks, and guys like that. My platoon sergeant says to me - "Untersturmführer..." you see, we could say that in the Waffen SS. You could call your superior by just his rank or even his first name. In the Army you would have to say "Herr Leutnant" but not in the SS. We used "du" instead of "Sie". We had Kameradschaft in the SS! Anyway, my platoon sergeant says: "Untersturmführer, throw away that Spielzeug (play-toy)...", he meant my German machine pistol, "...and I will give you a weapon that is reliable!" Then he hands me this Russian machine pistol. We called them "Finka" like the Russian soldiers did. I think this name came from the war in Finland. You see, the German machine pistol was a well-made weapon, but get some sand in the thing and bye bye!! The Russian gun had this wobbly Schloß (bolt) and looked like something some village blacksmith would have made. But it worked! One of our men demonstrated once by throwing handfuls of dirt into the Schloß of one of them, and it still fired!

I got a Sturmabzeichen and a Wound Medal I got from a Katyusha rocket fragment that still rests against a major nerve, and the Iron Cross First and Second Class. I don't remember what I did to get the Iron Cross 2nd Class, my God, they even gave it to Hitler Youths who just stayed at their posts during an air raid. It is interesting how I got the Iron Cross 1st Class. I was out of shells for my tank. The Russians had overrun this big pile of our shells and you could actually see this pile only a kilometer or so behind the Russian battle-line. I ordered my driver to drive for it, and we drove through the Russian lines to get the ammunition. When we got there, we loaded all we could and then drove back to our lines. Somebody who saw me do this told somebody else, and I got the Iron Cross 1st Class. It was not bravery, if I was my commanding officer and knew what I know now, I would have had myself court-martialed. All I did was endangering my tank and my crew. I don't remember how much fire we took when we did it.



The story of Steve

“When I was finally released from Tiszalok prison camp at the end of 1953, I was 27 years old and had spent one-third of my life as a World War II POW. For more than five and a half years I was held in a series of prison camps in Siberia, and for three more, the post-war communist regime in Hungary imprisoned me as part of a slave labor force in my home country. You must wonder how all this could happen.

My parents had a little farm in the small German-speaking town of Bakonysarkany in Hungary. I was born Stefan Klesitz in June 1926 and had an older brother, Joe, and a younger sister, Regina. Our farm was very simple. We had a couple of cows, two horses for plowing, and a pig, and we raised corn and some potatoes. Sometimes there was extra to sell, but most of what we raised supported our family. Of course, no electricity; the lights ran on petrol. The town was small, maybe 1,000 residents, and everyone spoke German. In school, we learned Hungarian, but I hated school. It was run by the Catholics, and they had a terrible philosophy. If you were late, they beat you. If you didn't know an answer, they beat you. If you laughed in class, they beat you. They had a bamboo stick, and even in summer when we wore shorts, they would swat you on the back of your bare legs. Every week you had to go to confession, and I would make something up to confess just to get it over with. The minute I got away from my hometown, I never went to church again. I was about 13 when the war broke out in Europe, but we didn't feel it too much in my hometown. In the beginning, Hungary was not attacked or occupied by Germany, but the Hungarian leaders allowed Hitler to travel through Hungary to Russia. In 1942 the war was still going pretty well for Germany, and my brother Joe volunteered to become a member of the Waffen SS. About that time my father died of cancer, and I quit school to stay home and run the farm. After the Battle of Stalingrad went so bad, things changed for Germany. In 1944 Hitler decided to occupy Hungary, and by then Germany was drafting men from about age 17 all the way to about 42. There were no more volunteers. Even the Waffen SS started drafting soldiers, and that is what happened to me in September of 1944 shortly after I turned 18. They were taking everybody by then. Even a school buddy who had severely broken his leg and ended up with a knee that wouldn't work was told he'd be perfect for kitchen duty. I became part of the 22nd SS Cavalry Division “Maria Theresa” and was sent to a nearby town for training. That late in the war, the Romanians had thrown

in the towel and were fighting with the Russians, moving quickly into Hungary. Troops were needed in a hurry, so we only had one month of training before we were sent to fight. Like other members of the Waffen SS, we had our blood type tattooed on the inside of our left bicep. Originally, the Waffen SS was the most valued of the German military branches and were thought to be the worthiest of medical care if wounded. During triage, the tattoo would notify medical personnel which soldiers were SS. By 1944 the Waffen was no longer purely volunteer, but the practice remained, and conscripts like me were still tattooed. The little "A" on my left arm would eventually cause me a lot more trouble. I didn't know what the hell I wanted to do in the army, but I knew I didn't want to walk. My buddy and I saw some BMW motorcycles where we were drilling and decided that is what we wanted, so we volunteered for reconnaissance. In October the Maria Theresa division was sent out to the Hungarian flatlands and stationed in a little place called Kecskemet. The Russians were already in the area, so those of us in reconnaissance would ride out on our motorcycles to try to gather whatever information we could. By early November the weather was rotten, really rotten, and there was no reconnaissance, just lots of rain and lots of snow. We lived in the trenches then, and you had to be careful. You'd stick your head up and maybe get shot. I had an MG42, the fastest machine gun in the war, and I would fire anytime there was an attack. Did I ever hit any of the Russians? You didn't really follow the bullets, but I must have killed some of them. By the middle of November, nobody really knew where the front lines were. The Russians were trying to surround Budapest, so we did more reconnaissance. On Christmas Day, they called the whole division back to a town called Soroksar, and we had a little ceremony at a school where they gave out medals and decorations. I hadn't been in long enough to earn anything, and I wasn't that brave. We marched all that night out to Vecses where the airport is now. The next day, December 26, another machine gunner and I were ordered to set up our guns and guard a bunker about 50 meters away from where officers were meeting. We had two machine guns, one that was pretty new and an older one that always seemed to jam. The other guy and I took turns going to breakfast. He went first, and when he came back, I started to go. But at the same time, an officer yelled, "Everybody out! The Russians are coming!" I grabbed the old machine gun and started monkeying with it to make sure it wouldn't jam. Then I heard someone whistle, and the bullets started flying like a son of a gun. The other guard with the good gun was hit, and I never saw him again. The Russians had broken through our front line, so our officers yelled to retreat. A Panzer II tank was in a ditch, and a bunch of us went over to help pull it out. Russians were all along the road, maybe 100 meters from us when we got the tank out. We all jumped on, and I crouched on the metal guard plate for the track. I couldn't carry the machine gun and hold on at the same time, so I gave the gun to another guy. The Russians were throwing everything at us. Artillery shells were exploding all around, puffs of black smoke and debris flying everywhere. Soldiers in front of us would get hit, but the tanks just kept going, moving forward right over the fallen bodies. That is when I said to myself, "If I get through this alive, I never die." Right then the tank driver said something to me about how white the guy behind me was. I turned and saw that he had been hit and was trying to hold on. I grabbed him by the hand to keep him from falling. All of a sudden 30 meters behind me there was a red flame and black smoke. Shrapnel from the exploding shell tore into my

face, ripping off my upper lip and knocking out four of my teeth. I didn't even realize I had been hit. I must have been in shock; I just jumped down and started running. We had the white sides of our coats turned out for winter fighting, and when I looked down, the front of mine was red from all the blood pouring down my face. My mouth felt like it was full of gravel, and I spit out shrapnel and teeth. Somehow I made it back to the first aid place, and they bandaged me. At 7 that night I was put in a Mercedes truck and taken to the Park Saloda Hotel on the Pest side of Budapest where a makeshift hospital had been set up in the basement. Castle Hill, originally built in the 13th Century, was across the Danube on the Buda side of the city, and I was moved there later the same night. Sometime after midnight, they took me up to an operating room to chop off a section of my lip and sew everything together. That was the only time I ever saw a doctor, and I never was given anything for the pain; no anesthetic, no pain medication, no nothing. One tooth was broken and the others had been knocked out by the artillery blast. I suppose I was lucky to be alive; if the shrapnel had hit the side of my head, I would have been killed for sure. But all I remember is a terrible pain. The blood caked under the bandage and a few whiskers I had at 18 grew into the mass of blood and scabs. After one week a first aid guy came in to give me a new bandage. He just grabbed the old one and pulled it away with no warning at all. I tell you, the pain was unbelievable. When everything ripped away, I wanted to kill that guy. After that, I moved my bandages a little each day so nothing would stick like that again. While at Castle Hill I discovered a storage room where equipment and supplies were kept. Some clothing was also in there, and I noticed a new pair of leather boots that I took for myself. They were a little tight on me but beautiful, the kind that lace up the lower part of the leg. By the end of January 1945, most of the troops had retreated into Castle Hill. Four or five stories high and with thick walls, it could be defended against the bombs and shells the Russians threw at us. There were ports in the walls where machine guns could fire out, and there were tunnels where many wounded were kept. The most severely wounded, those who could not walk even with crutches or a cane, were down in the lower tunnels. I could walk and get around quite easily, so my job was to carry water to the kitchen. As the Russians slowly surrounded the city, conditions inside Castle Hill got very bad. If there was any food at all, it was weak soup and maybe some very bad bread that I'm sure had sawdust in it. Out in the streets the shelling sometimes killed a horse, and when that would happen, people would cut something off the dead horse to eat. But even the horses were skin and bones and didn't provide much to anyone. Food or supplies that were dropped to us either fell into the river or were grabbed by the Russians. It was the middle of winter, the weather was just terrible, and we were slowly starving. Sometime in early February, I found my older brother Joe. After volunteering he had fought the Russians all the way to Moscow, but he was at Castle Hill the same time I was in early 1945. One night when outside I heard some of our soldiers talking loudly and I said to myself, "I know that voice." I yelled to him, and I'll be a son of a gun, it was Joe. Things grew worse, and by February 11, everyone knew the situation was hopeless. The officers told us we could try to break out and get through the Russian lines back to Germany, or we could surrender. Almost 30,000 troops tried to break out, and fewer than 1000 actually survived. Most were killed by the Russians in and around Budapest, as were many thousands of Hungarian civilians. On February 13, 1945,

my brother Joe and I were among roughly 5000 troops, many of them wounded, who surrendered to the Russians. That was the day I became a prisoner of war. I was only 18, and I would not be a free man again for nearly nine years. The Russians told the wounded that could walk with crutches or a cane that they could leave; they could try to walk back to their home countries. Those too sick, too weak, or wounded and unable to walk were left down in the tunnels on beds of straw. The rest of us were judged healthy enough to become slave labor for the Russian conquerors. I have to tell you what I heard about those wounded men left down in the tunnels. I heard this from a woman who was a civilian in Budapest. Sometime after the war, she married a Hungarian man who had been a prisoner with me. After the surrender, there was so much murder and terrible raping in Budapest by the Russian soldiers. This woman was a teenager at the time, and like many other young women, she wore several layers of clothing to make herself look older, heavier and unattractive, trying to keep from being raped. She was not raped, but she was forced by the Russians to do cleanup work. The lice were so terrible in Castle Hill. The straw bedding in the tunnels looked like it was crawling, there were so many lice. Apparently, the Russians gave the wounded soldiers left behind gasoline to rub on themselves to kill the lice. Well everybody smoked. Soldiers smoked and prisoners; everybody. It must have been the gasoline the very weak ones rubbed on themselves, and it must have been someone smoking that started the fire. Shortly after the surrender, about 2,000 of those prisoners were burned alive when a fire tore through the catacombs. My friend's wife was one of the women forced to go into the tunnels, and many years later she told me about having to drag out the charred bodies.

The first day after our capture, we were forced to walk to Budakeszi, about seven or eight miles outside Budapest. We marched again on the second day, and there was this place where all these Jews were gathered, kind of like a picnic area. The Russians put them there and made all of us prisoners look at them as we marched by. Germany had occupied Budapest in March of 1944, and in November that year, the Jewish quarter was made into a ghetto, and about 200,000 Jews were kept there behind a high fence and stone wall. In January, after about three months, the ghetto was liberated, and I'm sure the Jews we saw that second day were from the Budapest ghetto. That night we stayed in a wine cellar, and my feet were killing me. The leather boots I took at Castle Hill had gotten wet, and my feet swelled inside them from all the walking. I couldn't take them off. The next day I took two vineyard stakes to use as canes to help hobble along. We were put into lines based on how healthy we were. I got into a line, and behind me there were four or five guys who were worse off than me, limping along as best they could. Suddenly I heard a shot. This guy who had been at the end of the line was on the ground, and the Russian guard was putting his gun back over his shoulder. Then he went to the next guy at the back of the line and shot him! They were shooting the ones they thought were too weak to keep walking. My brother was next to me, and he said, "If they think you can't walk, they'll shoot you. You must keep up." So I dropped the vineyard stakes. Let me tell you I had tears in my eyes, it hurt so much to walk, but I was afraid they would shoot me. As I walked my feet felt a little better, and I could shuffle with less pain. I kept moving farther up in line, away from the back. The guard ended up shooting all the guys who had been behind me when I first got in that line. That night we stayed in a school, and in the

evening a Russian guard decided he wanted my boots. He started pulling on them and shouting something in Russian. Those leather boots had not been off since our capture, and my feet were still swollen inside. He pulled even harder, and then he took out his pistol and pointed it at my head. Even though it was in Russian, I'll never forget for the rest of my life what he said. "Ya streilite, ya streilite," meaning "I shoot you, I shoot you." In Russian. I begged him, "No, No, No." I didn't know Russian, but I pushed on the boot as hard as I could, and finally, the first one came off. Then he pointed the pistol at my head again and started pulling on the second boot. It too finally came off. My feet were swollen and the pain was terrible, but he didn't shoot me. He took those leather boots and gave me the ones he was wearing, boots made in America with rubber soles. I think it was about the third or fourth day after our capture when the Russians forced us to strip our clothes off so all the hair on our bodies could be shaved to get rid of the lice. Our clothes were put into a room and made very hot, so hot the buttons burned our skin when we put them back on. But the heat had killed the lice. On the fifth day, we were loaded onto a Studebaker truck the Americans had supplied to the Russians, and we were taken to Temeschwar in Romania. We were kept about two months in Temeschwar, those of us who survived. I had been raised on a farm, and I was young and tough. But the Russians had grabbed everybody in Budapest; old men, young men. Civilians. People who had been raised in cities. We lived like a shoe nail in Temeschwar, and many of those who were not tough would die there. When we arrived my brother and I were separated. He had shrapnel pieces in his back from an earlier wound and was taken somewhere to be treated. I would not see him again until many years later. In this camp at Temeschwar, they had five buildings, each divided in two. They put 800 men in one building, 400 in each half, and the living conditions were unbelievable. We had no room; 400 people in a space like my kitchen and half my living room today. Standing in there we were right next to each other. To lie down, we had to be in rows with our knees bent, all facing the same direction. If we straightened our legs, we kicked the head of the guy in the row below us. To turn over, the whole row had to turn over. And if someone had to go to the toilet, there was nothing but cursing and yelling. Unbelievable. And always full. If someone died, they brought in another guy. Always 400. The toilet was outside, a hole dug in the ground with a log over it to sit on. If it rained, the hole filled up and everything ran down a ditch next to the barracks. I can't doctor this up to make it sound better; it was really like that. My barrack had a wood floor, but the other four buildings just had dirt. For food, we had a little cabbage soup - water, some salt, and maybe a leaf of cabbage. My barrack got that lousy soup at 2 a.m. each day. At 11 in the morning, we got a little cube of bread. Nothing more. That wasn't enough to live on, and some of the weak ones died each day. A horse wagon came by, and we dragged the dead ones out to be picked up. Next to my barrack was where they put the dead; sometimes 100, sometimes 110 a day. One morning I woke up and told the guy next to me to wake up too. But he was dead. Toward the end of April 1945, about two months after arriving at Temeschwar, we were loaded into railcars on a small gauge railroad. We began a five-day trip I never will forget in my life. No food, no water, no nothing for five days. About 60 or 70 men in a boxcar. Four vertical layers of board platforms to lie on, a guy right next to you and a board shelf with more guys right above you. There was a little semicircle space in front of the door where a guy could

stand. The doors remained open about six inches. A board maybe one inch by six inches came down from the ceiling and a piece was nailed across the opening in the doors. That was the toilet. When you used it, everything went flying out the opening in the doors. After five days on this little railroad, we finally arrived in Ploesti, Romania about 3 in the afternoon. We were dying of thirst, but they wouldn't let us out right away. After half an hour, I got up and moved over by the doors. Right then we heard a shot and a buddy—the guy who was sitting next to the spot I just left—fell over. A Russian guard outside the boxcar had been fooling around with a gun and discharged it. The bullet went through the boxcar wall and killed my buddy. If I had still been sitting there, it would have killed me instead. Finally, they let us out, and we all cried, “Where’s the water, where’s the water?” We saw some water running in a trough on the ground and fell down on our hands and knees and began to drink it. It was greasy, soapy water, coming from an area where men had been washing, and I remember thinking to myself, “I can’t believe I’m drinking this bad water.” But we were all so thirsty we didn’t care. We were only one night in Ploesti. The day after we arrived, the Russians loaded us onto large gauge railroad cars, and we began a 34-day journey to Siberia. The cars were very much like the ones we had traveled in from Temeschwar; the same layers of board platforms to lie on and the same type of toilet. No blankets, no mattresses. We had only the clothes we wore when captured at Castle Hill, and we used our boots for pillows. Food was cooked in a kitchen car, and when we stopped, terrible beet soup and maybe some type of corn would be brought to the individual cars where we were kept. There were always Russians with guns guarding us when the food came to the cars. It was during one of these stops sometime in May when a Russian guard kept saying, “Jvar Kaput,” trying to let us know the war was over, and Germany had surrendered. But there was no celebration in the railroad car. The war was far from over for those of us on the train. That train carrying about 2,000 prisoners continued east and north, crossing the Ural Mountains and reaching Sverdlovsk on the 34th day. Although some would continue on, I was among about 250 Hungarian prisoners ordered off at Sverdlovsk. There I saw many German prisoners who had been captured at Stalingrad earlier in the war. The weather was so unpredictable in Siberia during the summer. The first night at Sverdlovsk we had a foot of snow, and the next day it was warm. All the snow disappeared just like that. If you thought it was hot one morning and did not take your coat out to work, the clouds could come over and make it so cold you thought you’d freeze. I worked in different places at Sverdlovsk during the three months I was kept there. For a little while I worked in a factory that made ammunition for rocket launchers mounted on trucks. I did some construction work, and I also worked in the forest harvesting logs that were loaded on old T-34 tanks that had the gun turrets removed. To this day I remember the bedbugs at that camp. The walls were crawling with them at night. They were terrible; if you slept and they began biting you, you didn’t feel them. If a light went on, they disappeared. And these were fat bedbugs, full of our blood. We never had enough to eat, but I tell you, the bedbugs never went hungry.

At most of the camps in Siberia, we were given enough clothing to try to keep out the worst of the winter cold, but we never seemed to have enough. The coldest I experienced was 68 degrees below zero, but anytime it was colder than 30 below, we didn’t have to go outside to work. Frostbite was always a risk. I remember a guy who was

given a job unloading loaves of bread from a wagon to the kitchen, and he did the job with no gloves. When he was done, all his fingers were frostbitten, and he ended up losing them. We wore many layers of heavy pants and sweaters and jackets. The fabric on our shoes was an inch thick, and we wrapped this wool thing around our heads and faces so only our eyes were exposed. You never knew who anybody was until they talked. Even then we had little ice things on our eyelashes. I tell you, if somebody pushed you over, you had a heck of a time getting up. And to take a leak? Oh, that was a disaster! We slept in barracks in Siberia that were buried in the ground far enough so the little windows were just above ground level. Usually, there were about 250 in one barrack, and you would sleep right next to someone to stay warm. The ground insulated the buildings, and there was a stove inside for some heat. Everybody who went out working brought a piece of wood or coal back to the barrack at the end of the day. Some crippled guys who couldn't work would stay up at night to load the fire. Once in two or three weeks, we would get a shower. They would take us to a room and we would take all the clothes off and get into a shower that wasn't hot, but it was warm enough to be comfortable. In some camps, they gave you a canteen type of thing as well as a spoon, but sometimes a spoon was the only possession you could have. Mine was a steel thing...the handle was a knife and the other side a spoon. If I ever got something like a potato, I could cut it and then chew with the side of my mouth that still had teeth. A prisoner always kept his spoon with him. Most of the food we were given was very plain. If there had been a good corn crop, we had some type of corn every day; corn for breakfast, corn for lunch and corn for dinner. If wheat had been good, we had some kind of wheat for every meal. The same thing with beans. Never meat, only a mush type of thing—just grain, salt, and water. The only vegetable was stinging nettle, and you know, once it is cooked, it is perfect. It doesn't even taste bad. I remember two times when we had something more. Once the guards had been given some beef, and when they were done, they gave us the bones, and let me tell you, we sucked those bones until there was nothing left. Another time, they got in barrels of salmon and gave us some pieces. We ate every bit, including the bones.

Russia had been beaten down in many ways during the war and needed laborers to help rebuild it. There were labor camps every 10 miles or so in Siberia, and not only POWs but also Russian political prisoners and criminals were sent to these camps. Whenever I was moved, I was always sent north. After spending June, July, and August at Sverdlovsk, I was loaded on a train and sent north to Nizhny Tagil, a large camp of nearly 3,000 workers, a place where I would spend the next three years. We were grouped by nationality at Nizhny Tagil, and one of my first jobs was to help build a sewer line with picks and shovels. The line had to be buried over two meters deep because the ground was often frozen to that depth in winter. Stalin was fearful that he could find himself in a war with America, so he was still building weapons. At Nizhny Tagil, we had a factory that made more T-34 tanks. Many of us also unloaded coal for the steel smelting factories. Iron ore was mined nearby, and although mainly Russians worked the iron, prisoners at times were given the job of loading the slag onto little railroad cars so it could be hauled away. One day at Nizhny Tagil the KGB came, and all the prisoners were made to take their shirts off and raise their hands over their heads. During the war when the Russians had examined the bodies of dead Waffen SS, they had learned about the A or the B or the O

blood type tattoo the soldiers had been given. Now they were looking to see which of their prisoners had been Waffen SS. And wouldn't you know, the KGB sent home many of the prisoners who did not have the tattoo. Stalin figured that the SS guys must be Germans, and he wanted to keep them and have them work more years to punish them for the war. The non-SS Hungarians were sent back home sometime in 1948, but they told me and guys like me we were German and had to stay. One day at Nizhny Tagil the KGB came, and all the prisoners were made to take their shirts off and raise their hands over their heads. During the war when the Russians had examined the bodies of dead Waffen SS, they had learned about the A or the B or the O blood type tattoo the soldiers had been given. Now they were looking to see which of their prisoners had been Waffen SS. And wouldn't you know, the KGB sent home many of the prisoners who did not have the tattoo. Stalin figured that the SS guys must be Germans, and he wanted to keep them and have them work more years to punish them for the war. The non-SS Hungarians were sent back home sometime in 1948, but they told me and guys like me we were German and had to stay. Now listen to this. It is a story my brother told me long after the war. Like me, he had a blood-type tattoo on his left arm. And although he was in a different camp, he too was told to strip to the waist and raise his arms over his head. But my brother always had big ear lobes; he raised his arms quickly and his ear lobe covered the tattoo. He put his arms down just as quickly, and no one saw his tattoo. He was sent home in 1948, and once back in Hungary, which had become a communist country, he was able to escape across the closed border into West Germany. The years 1946 to 1948 were very bad in Russia. There were shortages of everything, and what there was, Stalin tried to stockpile in case the cold war escalated. It was a very bad time for citizens, but it was even worse for prisoners. From October of 1946 to January of 1948 nobody in the camp was really working. The guards didn't make us work because they knew we had no energy. We were starving. Of 3000 prisoners, maybe 100 might go out for three or four hours a day to bring in any supplies that might be available to keep us alive. During this period, I got down to 45 kilos, less than 100 pounds. Sometimes if I had to climb a couple of steps, everything would go black for a few seconds because I was so weak from hunger. Of course, as a prisoner there were times when I would think of holidays or home, think of girls or what my family might be doing. But during the time we were starving, we only thought of food. We didn't think of home or freedom or family. We thought of food and nothing else. Only food. And we would look for food whenever we could. Of course, searching for it backfired on me and other prisoners more than once. One time when we were outside, a German prisoner found some mushrooms. He heated the blade of a shovel and fried the mushrooms right on it. Well, I thought I wanted some of those, and I went looking for mushrooms so I could do the same thing. I found some, heated them the same way, and ate them right up. Oh boy. An hour later I had the worst stomach pains, and my eyesight went all crazy. They sent me to the camp doctor in a little barrack where they did some medical work. In that place, they stuck a tube down my throat and pumped water into my stomach. Oh, it was terrible. Other guys had to hold me down, and I gagged and gagged. But all that stuff came up. Then they stuck a tube in the other end and washed me out that way too. Oh man. They gave me no food for four days. But I guess it saved me from those bad mushrooms. I'm still here. Sometimes we would look around in the garbage from the

guards' quarters. I knew a guy who found some old coffee grounds and ate them. But he got so sick that he landed in the medical barrack. The Russians would doctor some of their stuff so prisoners wouldn't try to eat it. I remember one time a guy came across a barrel with some kind of oil in it. When he stuck his finger in and tasted it, he thought it tasted a little like sunflower seed oil, so he took some back to the barrack and later put it on a crust of bread. After that he had nothing but diarrhea for three or four days. The Russians had put something in the oil, I'm sure. Early in 1948 the ruble was devalued and new money was printed. Things improved at Nizhny Tagil; they fed us more and we could work again. And again, we started thinking of things other than food. Sometimes I'm asked how I could put up with forced labor for so long, and the answer is that we always had hope. We always hoped we'd go home. And the Russian mentality to keep prisoners from giving up hope was to promise us something three months in the future. Actually, to lie about the future. They would say, "We will send some of you home in three months." But in three months they'd have an excuse... "The bridges washed out" or "We have a new job to do first," or "You didn't get enough work done." Russians are first class liars. One fellow Hungarian I remember saying to me in 1948, "If I knew they would keep me here this long, I would have killed myself." Toward the end of 1948, after three years at Nizhny Tagil, I was moved north again, this time to a camp called Krosna Ural, or in English, Red Ural. The place was about the size of Modesto and had perhaps 1,000 prisoners altogether. The Russians thought they were keeping the guiltiest ones there. At Krosna Ural, there was another sorting of prisoners, and the Germans who had been Wehrmacht, or regular army, were allowed to go home. I was kept. Here I worked mostly in a huge copper mine. There was an elevator that went down 300 meters into the earth, and side tunnels led away from the main shaft in many directions. We were made to drill holes in the rock with a compression drill that used bits two meters long. We would drill nine holes, and then a Russian lady would come in and wire explosives into the holes. We would move around the corner, and then the charge would send stuff flying like a son of a gun. We shoveled the ore into little mining cars, pushed the cars over to the main shaft and dumped them. When a large cart at the bottom of the shaft was full, it was hauled to the surface. Until this time, my family assumed I was dead. Letters out of Siberia were censored, which really meant they never got out, especially if you mentioned you were starving. But while at Krosna Ural in 1949, I received the only letter I would get during the time I was imprisoned. You see, there was a Hungarian guy in camp with me who had heart problems and who was told he would be sent home. He was from a little town where a neighbor woman from my home village had moved. When I was young, my family had helped this woman, kind of looked out for her. I asked the guy who was headed home to tell this woman I was alive. And he did. I did not know at the time that my mother and sister had moved to England, but this woman in Hungary did, and she wrote to my mother. My mother wrote to my aunt in Canada and sent her my brother's new address in Stuttgart, West Germany. It was my aunt who wrote to me from Canada. I never knew if my mother or sister wrote to me. If they did, the letters never arrived; the Russians probably threw the letters in the garbage. My aunt's letter was the only one I received, and in it, she passed on my brother's address. It was a street number I would memorize and never forget. In 1949, they moved us farther north, to the end of the railroad line and a camp at Karpinsk. There I

found the biggest coal mine I ever saw in my life. At Nizhny Tagil I had unloaded coal that had come from this place. In Karpinsk, there was about four meters of topsoil above 75 meters of solid coal. Topsoil would be scraped away and the holes would be drilled all the way through the coal. When the charge was set off, the coal would slump to the bottom of a huge pit where a conveyor belt brought it to the surface. Giant backhoes would fill railroad cars in just three scoops. The equipment we used was often American, given to the Russians by their Allies at the end of the war. Often I worked moving railroad tracks. They were just lying on top of the ground and were very flimsy, not secure at all. We moved the tracks often, and I always was afraid the locomotives would fall off. The town of Karpinsk was pretty new at the time, and there was not much there. Streets were just mud, and there were no sidewalks in the town. Some of the work we did was to build the main road and side streets. We used slag from the iron smelting at Nizhny Tagil for road base, loading that on Mercedes trucks the Russians had captured from the Germans during the war. The Russians - especially the truck drivers - were very happy with us for the paving we did. After 10 months at Karpinsk I left Siberia, but I was not set free. In 1950, many of us were put on a train and sent down through Moscow to the Russian town of Woronesh. The town had been totally bombed out during the war and was still in ruins. We were expected to work on the reconstruction there but were never asked what we could or couldn't do. They might say, "Today we need 50 men to do carpentry," and 50 of us would have to go. There were two main camps in Woronesh, and I was in the second. I actually lived in a hammer factory, and we had metal bunk beds with sawdust or woodchip mattresses. By then it had been more than five years since the war had ended, and by December of 1950, we were fed up and didn't work very hard. There were days when most of the time we just leaned on our shovels. If someone told us to get to work, we did it for a couple minutes and then stopped. It was kind of like a labor slowdown. It must have worked because Stalin said we were more trouble than we were worth, and he decided to get rid of us by finally sending us back to Hungary, a country that was by then under communist rule. The train to Hungary arrived in a town called Nyiregyhaza in the middle of the night, and right away we could tell it wouldn't be a happy homecoming. At the train station we were met by dogs, high beam lights, and soldiers with machine guns. The AVH, or Hungarian secret police, interrogated us all night and then transferred us to jails in Budapest. It was prison all over again. They put about 150 in one room with only straw on the floor, and although we had a sink and a toilet, for the first four or five days we were only allowed to drink water. We were given no food. A little short guy, an officer, would come in and play with our minds. He might tell us how lucky we were, that we were going to be given all the bacon we could eat and allowed to write letters home. Five minutes later he would return and tell us we were guilty of great crimes and that we were going to be taken out, shot, and our bodies thrown in the Danube because nobody knew we were there. I had been a prisoner of war in Siberia for almost five years, and now back in my home country I would be a prisoner of war for three more. We were held in the jail in Budapest for a month, and then in January of 1951, the Hungarian government sent me to a newly built forced labor camp next to the Tisza River. It was Tiszalok. Hungarians prisoners who said they wanted to go to the west were sent to Tiszalok, a total perhaps of 2,000 men. The Hungarian government was building a hydroelectric plant on the river, but

to generate electricity, the flow of water through the turbines would have to be increased. To do that, the course of the river would have to be altered. We were told to take the bend out of the river where it approached the site of the plant. Using picks and shovels and horse-drawn carts, we were to dig a new channel, straightening the river and making it drop in elevation to increase the current. We would dig two kilometers, then a drop, then one kilometer more. All by hand. At first, oh my God, they thought they were going to really give it to us bad. They fed us only this turnip soup that gave everyone diarrhea, and we became too weak to work. It was like Siberia again. The guards realized that plan didn't work, so they started giving us soybeans and we did better, we could work again. I thought to myself during this time, "I'm Hungarian, but I'm in a Hungarian prison doing slave labor. This shouldn't happen." But the guards would tell us they could take our citizenship from us because we had fought for the Germans. They would tell us they could shoot us any time, and no one would know. The first year at Tiszalok my main job was to lead the horses that pulled the carts of dirt prisoners had filled. After that they taught me to weld, and I started working in the shop or in the hydroelectric plant as it was being built. I have to tell you about a young Hungarian officer who was a prisoner with us then. He told us his name was Lazlo John, and he claimed he had fought with the Germans, but nobody remembered him from any prison camp in Russia. When we asked him which POW camps he had been in, he claimed he couldn't remember. Finally, we found out he was planted there, a turncoat, a spy. There was another man I should mention also. He was one of the guards, an officer, and because he was so tall, we called him "The Long One." This was a guard that all the prisoners respected. He would listen to us, and in turn we would listen to him. Prison in Hungary was worse than Siberia in many ways. I never got beaten, but over half the inmates were badly beaten while at Tiszalok. We called one of the guards "The Boxer" because he always punched prisoners in the face. If he called someone out for interrogation, they came back from there with a tooth missing or a bloody nose or a bloody face. He was "The Boxer," but really, he was a butcher. A Hungarian who hit other Hungarians. The uncertainty made it so hard; you never knew what was going to happen. There was a time when we were digging the new river bed. Guys shoveled dirt down to a cart, and when it was full, it was pulled out by a horse and emptied. One day this prisoner asked another, "Why do you work so hard? We don't get anything for this." That spy, the one who said he was Lazlo John, heard those guys talking. Later, the one who had asked the question was called out. They beat him so hard, and then he had to stand on the wall—nose on the wall and knees on the wall all night. If you don't stand on the wall you get beaten with a rubber stick. They did this to the guy for two weeks. When he came back to us he could hardly talk. Only a whisper. He made it out of prison eventually, but I remember him saying "If I ever get back here, I'm going to kill so many of them." He hated the communists so bad. For punishment they sometimes would make a prisoner bend over, then handcuff his wrists crossed to the opposite ankle and beat him. If he fell over, they beat him. If he passed out, they poured water on him and beat him some more. We had so many regulations: Take off your hat in front of an officer; never go anywhere alone or as a group of three, always two guys together. If you were alone or in a group of three, they beat you. I always followed the regulations, and that is why I didn't get beaten. I was young and I always looked even younger than I was; maybe that too was part of the

reason I wasn't beaten. Josef Ringhoffer, a very good artist, was an inmate at Tiszalok while I was there. In 1993 he published a book of paintings that record the work and the misery and the desperation that consumed each prisoner at the camp. We worked through 1951 and 1952 and 1953, always wondering if people in the west knew what was happening to us. We wanted to get word out somehow, and we found a way. The horses that were used to haul the carts of dirt belonged to civilians who lived nearby. Each morning they came in with the horses and took them back each night. These farmers probably got paid something for the use of their horses. Well, we got to know a farmer, and he hated the Hungarian communists. We asked him if he would take a little note and try to pass it along. We wrote down how many people were in the camp and where they came from. We folded the note and pushed it under the blinders on the horse. Notes like that, smuggled out of camps like ours, slowly made their way to West Germany, and a push began to release prisoners like those of us at Tiszalok. But we didn't know what was happening. By the autumn of 1953, after nearly three years of labor at Tiszalok, we got to the point where we could care less about life and the future. We were thinking, "Kill us, do whatever. We're not going to work anymore. All you do is lie to us. We're tired of it." On October 4, 1953, the guards called a meeting in the afternoon. The big boss wanted to give us a pep talk to increase production and finish the project. They always referred to us by our numbers rather than by our names. At the meeting, we were told we could talk, we could voice our concerns, but before talking we had to give our number. Some guys went up, gave their numbers, and talked about all the lies; "You said we could go home, but then we didn't. You said we could write letters, but then we couldn't. All lies." Later that afternoon, the guys who had stood up and talked were called out and taken away. Maybe 10 guys. The Long One, the only guard we trusted, was not in camp, having been called to Budapest a few days earlier. If he had been there, we probably would have gone to him. That evening out in the yard, we all started yelling, "Give us our comrades back!" It got louder and then even louder, everyone yelling like mad. The prisoners saw Lazlo John in the crowd and thought that was finally the time to get him. They started beating the hell out of him, but somehow he escaped and slid under the fence. But the guys in the guard towers knew he was really one of them and didn't shoot him. The yelling continued and after a while, the little short officer, the one who promised us bacon way back in the Budapest jail and then told us he could shoot us, came in the yard to try to quiet us down. I had been up toward the front with all the young guys, but about then I realized I had better think about what was going on. A Hungarian countryman of mine, Joe Meyer, was about 10 years older than me and was a guy I always trusted. Before the war, his family had lived about six farms over from mine. I said to myself, "I better find Joe and see what he is doing." I moved back toward the doorway to Barrack #2 where he was standing and said, "Joe, what is going on?" He said, "Come over here and watch out. They're going to start shooting." Just then the prisoners started for the little officer, and the bullets started flying. The officer had taken out his gun, and the guards in the towers had started firing theirs down into the crowd of prisoners. When it was over, five prisoners had been killed and 30 more were wounded. Today, there is a memorial outside the hydroelectric plant that explains what happened and lists the names of the five who died that night. The uprising could have been avoided, I'm certain, if The Long One had not been away in Budapest.

And it should have been avoided because steps toward freeing prisoners like me were already being taken. Reports of what was happening in camps like Tiszalok had reached the west, and Hungary was being pressured to release us. The Long One had been called to Budapest to discuss just how that would happen. Immediately after the uprising, the guards punished us by giving us only water to drink. No food. But on the third day, The Long One returned and visited each of the barracks. Then we were made to go outside, to stand in a line, and facing us were Hungarian soldiers carrying machine guns. We thought, "Oh boy, what is going to happen to us now?" Then The Long One said, "What do you guys want to eat? You're going home." Right away we got better food. And for the next two months, more good food and no work. Then in December 1953, about two months short of nine years since I had been captured, I was put on a passenger train that headed west. There were just over 100 men in each car, and we only had the clothes that were on our backs, but when we passed Budapest and kept going, we started to relax. There was still much of Hungary on the other side of the Danube, and they could always turn around. But they didn't. They kept heading west. When we reached the Austrian border, I finally allowed myself to think; maybe I really am going to be free. I had been given a Hungarian passport when we left Tiszalok, and at the border, a French delegation counted us by name and nationality and placed us in Austrian train cars. When that train stopped at a station inside Austria, we saw nurses standing there holding hands. When I think of it today, I still get very emotional. We could get out and walk around, walk wherever we wanted to. There were tables of food and chairs to sit in. I tell you, I never in my life had a sausage or a bun that tasted so good. Never in all my life. At that station, we were loaded onto buses and taken to Piding on the Austrian-German border. Two days there gave us a chance to clean up. I threw away my prison clothes and got new ones from a place like the Salvation Army here. We each had to send telegrams. I had my brother's address in Stuttgart still memorized and sent a telegram there. It didn't go through. I sent it again. Back came an answer from a woman who said she lived across the hall from my brother's place, but he was no longer there. In the telegram she told me my brother had emigrated to Toronto, Canada and that my mother and sister had also moved there from England. But she didn't have the address. In Piding we were given train passes to go wherever we wanted. When they saw me with my face wounds and when I gave my brother's old address, the people in Piding told me I should go to Stuttgart. There were hospitals there where my wounds could be fixed. In Stuttgart we were given passes to go anywhere we wanted on streetcars, and I immediately tried to find my brother's old address in the Feuerbach section of the city. I told a conductor where I wanted to go, and he took me right to the building. I pushed the first button. Nothing. I pushed the second button. Nothing. The third button. Suddenly a window opened up above me, and a fat lady called out, "Yaa?" I asked if Joe Klesitz used to live there, and again she said, "Yaa." It must have been the same woman who answered my telegram from Piding. I told her I had lived in POW camps, and she buzzed me up. I talked for quite some time, telling her my story, and she cried, she was so sorry for me. I left briefly to get food, and when I returned, my brother's friend who lived with the woman was there. He knew the address of the aunt and uncle of the girl my brother Joe had married. It was two kilometers away, and he said we should walk over there right then. So we did. My sister-in-law's aunt and uncle were home, and they gave

me the address in Canada for my family. When I got home that night to the little mission where I was staying, I thought, "Man oh man, am I lucky. And won't my family be surprised to learn I am alive." I told the officials in Stuttgart I was going to Canada in six months, so I had to have my face fixed right away. The skin had healed well in the nine years since I was wounded, but everything had kind of grown together. During the next six months, I had five operations. They took cartilage from my ear and rebuilt part of my nose, and they took skin from my thigh and used it on my mouth where the inside of my lip had grown into the gum. The dentist was authorized to give me silver teeth to replace the missing ones, but he said, "No, you went through so much, I'm going to put gold ones in." And he did. For many years my front teeth were gold. At the hospital they made noses for guys, they made lips, and they made jawbones. They saved so many war veterans however they could. I tell you, I was a movie star compared to some of the wounded ones there. During my six months in Stuttgart, I lived either at the hospital or with the aunt of my brother's wife. The German government supported me with streetcar tickets, and they gave me some money, which I gave mostly to the aunt. After the fifth operation, I did some physical therapy each day for about two or three weeks. There was a young nurse, about 18 years old, who had just started working at the hospital. I would talk a little to her each time I went in for treatment. When I went for my last appointment, I had my papers for Canada and was ready to leave Germany. I went around and said goodbye to everyone. When I said goodbye to that young girl, she said, "I hope I hear from you." "I don't know your name," I said. She told me then it was Lisa. I got on a train in Stuttgart, traveled to Bremerhaven on the coast, and boarded a ship, ready to leave behind both Germany and the life I had known. I was leaving not only a country but a continent that had been ravaged by war. I had seen so much pain and starvation and people being mean to each other. Stuttgart had been bombed out during the war, and even in 1954 the damage was obvious. On June 11 that year, I arrived in Canada and thought I was in heaven. Within two days I was reunited with my family in Toronto. Oh man, it was exciting. So many questions. They wanted to know everything that had happened to me. Questions and more questions. My mother at the time was working as a live-in housekeeper for a family there, so I moved in with my sister, Regina. I remember I first saw my brother on a Saturday, and he asked me what I could do. I told him I could drive a car, and I could weld. He said, "In that case you're going to be a body man." On Monday, just two days later, we called around, and on Tuesday I went to work in a small auto body shop owned by a Norwegian who paid me 70 cents an hour and who began to teach me that trade. I learned very fast, and when he ran out of work in three months, I worked for another guy for a dollar an hour. Not only was I learning how to use lead to fix dents - no one used bondo then - but I was also learning English. Back in one of the camps in Siberia, there had been a prisoner who was very good with languages, and he had learned English. He taught me a little, but of course it does not stick until you start to use it. The second Christmas I was in Toronto, I bought some cards to send to my friends. I had just one left and thought to myself, who should I send this last card? I hadn't even thought of Lisa, the young nurse who had treated me in Stuttgart, but I remembered right then she had told me when I left she hoped to hear from me. I sent her that last card and asked her if she were interested in coming to Canada. She wrote back and said, "Yes, I'm interested." We started writing back and forth.

I think she was 20 and I was about 29 by then. I found out that to come to Canada she would have to go to immigration and tell them she was engaged. And once in Canada, she would have about 90 or 120 days to get married. Well, I remembered what a nice girl she was, and I thought I might marry her...she was very good looking. I told her all of this, and she decided to come. Lisa arrived in June or July 1956, and we were married in Toronto on October 20. Our son Ron was born there in 1957. I continued to learn the auto body business and worked for a number of different shops and dealerships, but Toronto was cold, and I often thought of finding a warmer place to live. In 1962 this guy I knew left for a long vacation to America, planning to drive around the whole country. By then Lisa had an uncle living in Redwood City, and I asked this guy Martin to check out the weather for me in the Bay Area. When he returned to Canada, he told me the weather was perfect, that you could wear just a shirt in the evening all year. Well, that is what I wanted. In 1963, Lisa, Ron and I moved to Redwood City, and within a few days, I had a job doing bodywork at Smythe Buick when it was still in San Jose. I commuted for about 10 months before moving the family to Campbell. Our daughter Janet was born in 1964, Anita in 1967, and my second son, Eric, was born in 1969. Smythe Buick moved to Santa Clara in 1965 and I continued to work there until I started my own business in 1968. That year there was a strike of the auto body union, and during the strike, a guy I knew, a Porsche mechanic who had worked at Lockheed, talked to me about going into business. He had a building that was much too big for him and invited me to use half of it to start an auto body shop. So I did. I retired 13 years later, and I have to say a lot happened in those 13 years. We had plenty of money, but money doesn't make people happy, and Lisa wasn't happy. We separated two different times, the second and last time in 1978. She stayed in the house in Campbell, and I moved to Morgan Hill. After our divorce, a Swedish friend talked to me about investing in natural gas wells in Oklahoma, and I began to do that. That was also about the time I met Marie Lapierre through the German Club down there, and we began dating. America is the land of opportunity. I worked hard, my business was very successful, and the gas wells turned out to be a good investment. Those are the reasons I could retire in 1981. Lisa died on the 3rd of July in 1984. She was baking some things that day and while walking to the market to buy sugar, she was hit and killed by a young man driving with just a learning permit. Though I kept the property in Morgan Hill, I bought a house in Sonora in 1987 and moved here that year. In 2004 I became a U.S. Citizen, and in 2005 I exchanged the Morgan Hill property for 140 acres overlooking Melones Reservoir, where I live today. My children are all grown, and I have six grandchildren and one great-grandchild. Marie moved to Sonora too and is still my girlfriend, 35 years after I met her. These days I stay busy, taking care of my place and doing things with the local German Club. I water ski in the summers, and I snow ski for three months during the winter. Since retiring I've been able to travel to places like Australia and New Zealand, and I've been through the Panama Canal. Back in 2,000, I took my son Eric to Tiszalok to show him the hydroelectric plant and the memorial to those shot in the 1953 uprising. I wasn't proud to be in the Waffen SS. Unlike those who volunteered, I was drafted and went where I was ordered. I tried to shoot the enemy because I knew if I didn't, they would shoot me. It wasn't whether or not you liked what you were doing. You didn't want to get killed. By 1944 we knew they were rounding up the Jews, but we didn't know where they were

sending them. I found out about the death camps in 1953 when I got home. Many times I've been asked if I am angry or depressed about what happened to me. People wonder if I have nightmares, or if I am somehow bitter that I lost so much of my life to being a prisoner of war. And when people hear my story, they wonder how guys like me got through it all. I'm not angry or depressed. I sometimes have a dream about that time, but when I wake up, I laugh and say, "Oh, I'm so happy that I'm here and not there." I learned some good lessons during that time, too. Many officers who had been businessmen before the war were prisoners with me, and I often talked to them, asking them what they did and how they got started. I think that helped me later. And believe it or not, when I was in the camps, I tried not to dwell on it. If you did, it could kill you. It would just eat you up. I think that attitude carried over into my life after the war. When I would leave my body shop each night, I shut the door and didn't think about it until the next morning. When I got home at night, I couldn't even tell you what cars were in the shop or what I had done that day. It's true, some very bad things happened in my life. But some very good things happened too, just like in anybody's life. And I tell you, if it hadn't been for those very bad things, the best thing in my life would never have happened. You see, in 1963 we wanted to leave Canada and come to the United States to live. But there was no way they were going to let me in. After the Hungarian revolution in 1956 and the flood of refugees from it - some of them released criminals - countries didn't want more Hungarians. I argued and explained to the authorities that German was my first language, that my home village was German-speaking. I told them about being drafted and my wounds, about being in the prison camps. Finally, they said, "Your wife is German. Okay, we'll put you in the German quota for immigration." Do you see? If I hadn't been drafted, I wouldn't have been wounded. If I hadn't spent nine years in those terrible prison camps, I wouldn't have been having my wounds fixed in a German hospital in 1954, where I met Lisa. And if I hadn't married Lisa, I never would have made it to the United States. And coming to America was the best thing that ever happened to me.



The story of Joachim

This story was told to me by a good friend of mine; it is the story of one of his family members who served with the Waffen SS, with Dirlewanger to be more precise. It's nothing to be proud of and he was a bit hesitant to provide me with all this information. He admitted that this family member's past is like a dark shadow that has been hanging over his family since the end of the war. It takes a man a lot of courage to talk about his family's secrets, about a dark past, and therefore the name of this family will not be revealed.

Born and raised in Germany in 1911, coming from a good old German family, Joachim H. lived in Schlesien or Silesia during the Great War. After the war, he moved with his mother to Munich where he witnessed the street fights with the Freikorps and the communists. Later they moved to Dresden. In 1937 he joined the NSDAP and in 1939 he joined the SS. After he had served during the Polish campaign with an *Einsatzkommando* he was transferred to Berlin where he worked as a Verbindungsoffizier or liaison officer. After the French campaign he worked in Bonn, and after Barbarossa had started he was sent to the *Einsatzgruppe D* - under the command of Dr. Otto Ohlendorf - later in 1941. *Einsatzgruppe D* operated farthest south and was most known for its massacres in southern Ukraine and the Crimea, especially in Nikolayev, Kherson, Simferopol, Sevastopol, Feodosiya, and in the Krasnodar region. Joachim held the rank of SS Scharführer or Oberscharführer. Finally, in 1942, he joined the Waffen SS. He joined the 4th SS Polizei Division first but was then transferred to the 2nd SS Panzer Division "Das Reich" - one of the most elite units of the Waffen SS besides the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler - during the Battle of Charkow or Kharkov in 1943. At the Eastern Front, in Kharkov, he fought against the Russians in severe battles but after the third assault, something went wrong. Something had changed in his way of thinking and for whatever reason, he raped two women. After he had committed the crime, he killed both of them with a headshot and set their house on fire. Obviously, his actions didn't go unnoticed and he was called in by his unit leaders. He got called by his superior officer and he was stripped of all his weapons and he was arrested immediately. He was told that the division Das Reich was an elite unit of soldiers and not killers. The Division would not tolerate such barbaric acts as it would damage the image of the unit and the entire division. During a brief court-martial he was found guilty of raping and murdering two women and he was sentenced to serve time in the penal battalion or *Strafbatallion* somewhere in 1943. But before he could go to the *Strafbatallion* he had to serve time in prison first. This prison

was the infamous camp of Oranienburg. The decision to send him to the *Strafbataillon* was maybe the worst decision ever made. Serving time in the *Strafbataillon* actually meant that he would serve his time with the infamous Dirlewanger Brigade, which was well known for its atrocities and crimes committed towards civilians, partisans – resistance fighters, and POWs. When he joined Dirlewanger the first thing they did was to remove the blood type tattoo on the arm. They would cut it out or burn it. The reason why was that if a member got captured by the enemy, they wouldn't suspect him being a part of the Waffen SS. So, as we know, he was trained in the Oranienburg Concentration Camp and his first engagement with Dirlewanger was at the Russian front, in Belarus to be more precise. They were tasked to search for partisans and annihilate all partisan activity. Yes, annihilate! There was no mercy to be shown towards partisans! His unit was very successful in fighting the partisans at the Russian front but with the tide of the war turning, they were slowly retreating back towards Germany. He, like most of the members of the Dirlewanger Brigade, made themselves known for their numerous crimes and atrocities in Belarus.



Members of the Dirlewanger Brigade – courtesy of the Bundesarchiv

He was also put into action during the Slovak National Uprising and the Warsaw uprising in 1944. Dirlewanger was attacking Warsaw from Wolska and Towarowa Streets. It was ‘pacifying’ the Old Town, Powisle, Upper Czerniakow, and the City Center. The losses were reinforced with new criminals often with pending death sentences and SS-men from punishment units. His last engagement was in the Halbe Pocket or *Kessel von Halbe* (April-May, 1945) during the Battle of Berlin. It was in Berlin where he was captured by the Russians. While he was in Russian captivity, he said he was forced to join the *Wehrmacht* and that he was just a member of the *Heer* or Army. Of course, the Russians knew about the blood type tattoo for Waffen SS members and that some people tried to lie to escape repercussions for being members of the Waffen SS. So like many other captured German soldiers, he had to raise his arm...but the tattoo wasn't there. It had been removed before when he got into the Dirlewanger Brigade. The Russians believed him, that he was just a regular soldier and he was sent to a POW camp. He was released only two years later because he was no use to the Russians as he was only a “regular” soldier. He died in 1965, two decades after the war. He always kept his Dirlewanger past a secret for others, except for his family. They knew what he did during the war and they

were not proud of it. He seemed not to have a problem about what he did but his family had to live with the shame.



The story of SS Oberscharführer Kurt Schmidt

Kurt Schmidt held the rank of SS Sturmmann in 1941 and rose up all the way to SS Oberscharführer in 1944 until he was captured by the Russians in Berlin. He was lucky to escape as he did not have the blood type tattooed on his arm for those who did we brutally killed by the Russians. His commander at that time was SS Brigadeführer Wilhelm Mohnke. Kurt only had an EKII (Iron Cross 2nd Class) as a medal as he never received an EKI (Iron Cross 1st Class) or RK (Knight's Cross)! He's still very proud of his EKII as his father received an EKII during WWI. From 1942 to 1945 he was in Berlin and he was quite happy about that.

Before the war, in 1939, when he was only 19 years old, he was working in Hamburg as an industrial salesman. His boss noticed that Kurt was pretty tall and he told him that he would be the perfect example of a SS soldier and he told him to join the SS. He said to call the recruiting office immediately and gave the phone to Kurt – the recruiting officer was already on the line! Kurt joined the SS and became a member of the SS-VT or *SS Verfügungstruppe*. After the war he went back to his old job in Hamburg but his previous boss – the one that told Kurt to call the SS recruiting office - wouldn't shake his hand anymore because Kurt was a member of the Waffen SS. Kurt stated that after the war there were no more jobs but when Hitler came to power everybody had a job. *“He built the Autobahn and reinstated the old glory of the German Armed Forces.”* After the war, Kurt and his comrades were all unemployed for at least 5 years.

Kurt's company was a company that didn't really like the war. They were not killers or trigger-happy soldiers. They went through the war with the minimum amount of shooting. They were not bad people like many people like to describe the Waffen SS. They never

knew about the camps and they never saw one during their entire career. There was a war, they were young, and they had to do their duty for the fatherland. They went from country to country but the local population never had a problem with them - with Kurt's company that is. "*In Ukraine, the locals saw the German forces as their liberators of the Russian oppressor!*" Kurt was with the *Batallion Stab* or Battalion Staff in Russia - Joseph Tiefentahl was his commander. He – Tiefentahl - was sentenced to death after the war but he was never executed. Kurt was offered a 12-year commission in the Waffen SS but he never accepted it. He was also with Theodor "Teddy" Wisch in Russia. Teddy was the first one to get rid of the lice because he didn't want his men to see that he had lice! Kurt remembers that it was a very funny sight to see how Teddy wanted to get rid of these little annoying bugs. "Teddy... He was a gentle person, and he never did anything wrong. He never mistreated people. He was always honorable to his POW" said Kurt. "During a firefight in Russia, I remember it was pretty cold that day, Teddy gave me his cape to keep warm. This was when bullets were flying over our head! This is how gentle and caring he was for other people. Russia was a cruel war and partisans were treated differently because they fought the Germans from behind. The same thing was with the resistance in France. They were fighting you from behind, which was not an honorable thing to do. They are like ISIS today! Also, I know that a German officer was captured in France and that he got killed by the French resistance in a very brutal way. I believe this was in the area of Oradour. I know that lots of people got punished for this by the Germans. For this I think about the Division Das Reich, I've read something about it but I wasn't there. It was war and it was a very cruel time, for soldiers and civilians. But for a reaction, there's always an action that goes before it."

"The cold in Russia is something you won't forget!" In 1941 he was in Russia and it was about -25C. He never suffered from any frostbite. Because he wasn't really a frontline soldier, he didn't have to go through all the misery the frontline soldiers had to go through. "I was in France in 1940 but the battles were not that heavy like in Russia. There were not many casualties there like in Russia. The war was easier there in France. I remember that somewhere in Russia we were traveling by train. This train was attacked by airplanes and there was no way to escape for us. Three of my comrades got injured during the attack. The worst part was that it was freezing cold there as the temperature was -25C! I was lucky to spend 3 years in Berlin after I got wounded. When I came out of the field hospital I was sent to Berlin. I never saw Teddy Wisch again during the war. After the war, I saw him back but his legs were severely wounded. I knew Rochus Misch, who was also a SS Oberscharführer with the Leibstandarte. He was severely injured during the Polish campaign and from there he was found unfit for combat. He was transferred to the Reichskanzlei or Reichs Chancellery from then on."

At the end of the war, Kurt was with a group of SS men around some houses in Berlin. They knew the Russians were looking for German soldiers, in particular, Waffen SS. Kurt found some civilian clothing that was left behind in one of the houses, he took his uniform off, and he put on the civilian clothing. His comrades did the same thing. When he was in Berlin he was in the midst of the rubble. They were inside the houses while the Russians were outside advancing to the heart of the Reich. One of his comrades

made the mistake to fire on the Russians from a window. The Russians responded with a tank that fired toward the window where the shots came from. His comrade got killed instantly. Then the Russians yelled “*Comrade, come out!*” to the remainder of the group. “*It was a dumb thing to do to fire to the Russians in Berlin!*” Now Kurt was lucky because he didn’t have the blood type tattoo on his arm, as most of the Waffen SS men did.

Some of his comrades did have the tattoo and they tried to cut it out, burn it out, or find another way to remove it from their skin. Some of the attempts obviously failed. Then the Russians came and the first thing they had to do is to put their hands up. Of course, the Russians were looking for the blood type tattoo but they couldn’t find one on Kurt’s arm. This was his luck and he went into captivity. First in a Russian POW camp in Berlin, but only for 4 months. One of the Russian camp guards noticed that Kurt was a very tall man. All prisoners were given ration coupons to get their food every day. Kurt received double the number of coupons because the Russian soldier thought Kurt needed more because he was so tall. While in Russian captivity they had to cut all their hair. Probably because of the lice. “*The Russians always said that the Germans brought lice to Russia.*” Because the Russians saw him as a regular soldier he was handed over to the British. They saw him as a regular army and he had the chance to go to England to build railways.

Until this day Kurt finds it horrible what happened to the American soldiers that died on the day of the invasion on June 6 – 1944. Kurt says that the saddest part of the whole thing is that many soldiers died during the war, during combat, but that only their officers received the credits and the big medals for it.

“Before the war from 200 people, only 10 were retained for the LAH – Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler. I got in because I was tall. Once the war was raging the recruiting standards changed drastically. It still sickens me to see how they treated the WWII German soldiers after the war. It’s because we lost the war and we were the bad guys. It is very sad! Every year they still remember Hitler’s birthday – they even announce it on the radio - but they never remember the soldiers, the German soldiers. During the war, nobody had the courage to kill Hitler. Only Stauffenberg tried but he got killed. Just imagine how it feels when every morning you had to greet your colleagues with “Heil Hitler” instead of good morning. Can you imagine how it would be today? I saw many casualties during the war but we never wished for war.

Hitler came and honored the old, front soldiers of WWI. This way he gained trust and manipulated the people. I knew nothing about the KZ. I learned afterward about the KZ. It was something crazy. The Americans wanted Hitler gone and most of us knew that, he was gone by the news that was released upon his death in the newspaper. I never had the feeling that I fought for Hitler so when the news came in that Hitler had died, I didn’t feel a thing. I didn’t feel sad. I was not brainwashed like some of my comrades were that we had to fight for Hitler. I just fought for my country, not for Hitler! Even if I were a member of the Leibstandarte, I fought for my country!”



The Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler during parade – Courtesy of the Bundesarchiv



The story of Alois

Born in Boechout - Belgium, coming from a nationalist and Catholic family, Alois grew up in the region of Antwerp. Because he had some issues at home with his father he decided to leave for Germany before 1940. He was a Fleming, however, he adapted himself to the place where he was living at that time. He was fluent in German and he even spoke the language with one of the local accents. Because he was a plumber of the trade he was sent to work in Germany when the war broke out. He was, according to the SS, the perfect example of an Aryan: tall, blond, and blue eyes. He was fluent in German as well and if one wouldn't know his background, they would think he was born and raised in Germany. During his stay in Germany, he was doing several jobs at the

residences of members of the SS. Because he was good in what he did he gained some fame among the SS and soon he would have some “good” friends in the higher ranks of the organization. One day this would work out in his favor and save his life... Because he was a plumber of the trade he was put to work in a prisoner camp. The name of his unit/division and location of the camp are unknown. He loved doing his job as a plumber however one day he was asked to start working on a special “gas line” that had to be pulled towards these “special” chambers in the camp. He looked at the plans and then he started thinking why these lines needed to go to these “special” chambers. Then he realized what was going on, why they wanted to have these gas lines pulled towards these chambers. Immediately he stopped all his work and he went to see one of the officers that he knew from his private life in Germany. He had lots of friends and connections in the SS because he did the odd plumbing job at SS members’ houses. He approached the SS officer and told him that he couldn’t do this job, that he couldn’t work on these gas lines because he knew what they were planning to do. Because there was a certain friendship relation between them, he was told that it was ok but he would be transferred because of this. His transfer would be to the front. Again, Alois protested as he didn’t want to fight. He actually refused to fight and to fire his rifle. They made no problem with that and he was sent to the medical unit. As a medic, he went to France first. He had a good time there because he didn’t have to fight and he stayed in different farms. Because he was a pretty talkative person, he made friends with the locals. However, the good times in France came to an end soon. The war moved to Russia and he had to go there as well. In total, he spent three years at the Russian front as a medic. He never talked about his time at the Russian front because he said it was so horrible that even his children should never know what happened there and what he had to go through. When the war was over, he returned to Belgium, to Boechout to his parent’s house. There he was welcomed by his family and he stayed there in the attic. Actually, he had to hide because the White Brigade – a Belgian resistance group created in 1940 - and the Belgian authorities were looking for him. He was after all a member of the Waffen SS! Even if they didn’t know why he went to Germany and why he joined the Waffen SS, they were still looking for him. They didn’t know that he spent 3 years in Russia as a medic. For the Belgian authorities, it was clear and simple: he was a collaborator. His time in the attic came to an end soon when his father reported him to the authorities. Yes, his own father! He was taken in custody and put in a cage/kennel somewhere in Boechout, not far from his parent’s house. In Belgium, most of the collaborators, or “blacks” as some of the locals liked to call them, were put into animal cages/kennels. So, when people walked by these cages/kennels they could see the collaborators every time. Some people yelled at them when they walked by, or they spat at them, threw rocks or rotten fruit and vegetables at them. He stayed in the cage/kennel for a little while but he was finally transferred to a POW camp in Beverloo, Belgium. There he spent the next four years after the war. During his stay in the camp, he was asked many times to sign the papers so he could receive the death penalty. He laughed every time when they asked him to sign these papers. Of course, he never signed them so they couldn’t execute him. After a while, the legislation in Belgium changed and his death penalty changed into years of service in a penitentiary institution. After four years he got out and returned home. Like many other Belgian Waffen SS members or collaborators, he

was stripped of his rights as a Belgian citizen. They offered him his rights back after many years but he always refused. Not because he was stubborn, no, but because without your rights in Belgium you don't have to vote! Until today it is unknown of which Waffen SS Division he was part of.



The story of Oswald

August 1 – 1941. The “Vooruit” in Ghent: medical examination for the Flemish Legion or “Vlaams Legioen.” He’s 16, in a few days he turns 17. He’s a student in architecture, he’s adventurous, and a sports leader of the Algemeen Vlaams Nationaal Jeugdverbond (AVNJ) or General Flemish Youth Alliance. Full of pride Oswald reports to the Flemish Legion who will fight against Bolshevism, side by side with the Germans. The place where he needs to report is – ironically – the “Vooruit”, an icon of the socialist movement in Ghent. The building is occupied by the Germans and in the upper levels of the building, the volunteers are medically tested. All physical and mental parameters are being tested, also the non-discretionary look into the behind of the candidate volunteer, most likely to exclude homosexuals. From the more than 1,000 candidates only 405 are being selected. The young Oswald is one of them and he’s so proud of it. Soon he’ll be leaving to the Eastern Front. The adventure can finally start and the adrenaline is flowing like crazy! Oswald is determined about his adventure and he has no doubts about it, on the contrary. He can’t understand that there could be someone that would openly criticize him. Yes, his mom would. However, that is the motherly concern but that doesn’t make him change his mind. She’s serving the Flemish cause as well, out of conviction.

Just like his father Herman, an active member of the VNV - Vlaams Nationaal Verbond or Flemish National Alliance - they choose for collaboration with the Third Reich in the hope to become an independent state after the war. Germany would win the war and the new order was rising, at least that’s what the VNV firmly believed.

At that time Herman Van Ooteghem is the right hand of Staf the Clerq, “the leader”, how he likes to call himself. Also, Reimond Tollenaere, the flamboyant lawyer and propaganda leader of the VNV, is a regular at their home. Tollenaere resides in parliament however he’s got more respect as a symbol of the courage of the “new order.”

He's a great speaker, he writes fierce articles for the VNV propaganda magazine "Volk en Staat" or "People and State", and he travels through the country to deliver his speeches to the people. Oswald sees Tollenaere as the radical Flemish idealist.

The young Oswald was very impressed by his mentors; the Zeitgeist or spirit of the time has a serious influence on him. It is the time of being left or right. Polarisation! The Flemish-Nationalistic nest where he grows up in is a militant anti-Belgian, Catholic, tight and anti-communist. But also distinct pro-German! With his father, he visited the "new Germany" in 1937 and he saw that it was good, with a lot of social and industrial progress. The first year of the war in Belgium felt actually pretty "good"; the German occupational Army charms with order and discipline. Soldiers greet by clicking their heels together and are very courteous towards the local population.

When Germany attacked Russia in 1941 the family van Ooteghem sees this as a necessary evil. A preventative war to stop the advancing and ruthless Bolshevik regime was about to happen. It was all about saving the European civilization. Not long after the German invasion of Russia, the VNV-leaders announce that they want to send their own volunteer legion to the front. The Germans have to win the war. Against "the conspiracy of Judaism, capitalism, and Bolshevism," Especially Reimond Tollenaere is a great supporter to send Flemish volunteers to the front. The words of the propaganda leader go through Oswald's head." We have to claim an equal position for Flanders in the new Europe." The naive thought is that the one that supports the Germans the most during the war will get more after the war. On August 6, 1941, a young and excited Oswald leaves with a train decorated in flowers from Brussels North train station to the Polish training camp of Debica. On the platform, there were lots of pretty girls cheering at the soldiers while militant songs were sung. It's like a dream.

Fall/winter 1941: Training in Poland and Prussia; the first experiences at the front; Tossno.

The training in Poland and later in East-Prussia was hard and ruthless. From early in the morning until late at night there was shouting and yelling commands to the new recruits. It was a physical battle for sure. The food is fatty and many times it makes the stomach of the young Fleming turn. Mentally they receive their first big slap as they were promised Flemish commanders for the Flemish Legion, with their own officers and medical assistance. Soon they notice that reality is a lot different. The Flemings are welcome however they operate under German command as part of the Waffen SS. Some of the volunteers can't stand this way of working and they return home. Oswald decides to swallow the bitter pill for a while and decided to stay. He doesn't want to bring shame to his family. He pledges loyalty to the supreme commander of the German army and will fight until death for Nazi-Germany.

The Flemish Legion, being reinforced with new volunteers became 1,000 men strong and went for further training to Latvia and Russia. The atmosphere is pretty good. The Germans progressed rapidly to the vicinity of Leningrad and the Flemish Legion would primarily be used as an occupation army. However, they experience their first casualties... In the vicinity of Tossno a couple of Flemish soldiers were ambushed by

partisans. Oswald received the orders to stay in town and to wait until reinforcements arrive to rescue a kitchen vehicle. It is cold and he decides to warm up with a friend in a farmer's house. Once he gets back outside, he sees that his patrol is already gone. It won't be the first time that he has to find his way back to his camp in the cold and darkness of the night.

Spring 1942: the battle at the Wolchow, vicinity of Novgorod. A confrontation with death.

During the spring of 1942, the Flemish Legion was engaged in the battle of the Wolchow in the vicinity of Novgorod, about 200 km south of Leningrad. The atmosphere turns as another enemy joined the battle: the freezing cold. Overnight the temperature drops to -30 Celsius, sometimes even to -40! The men are not dressed for the cold and they can barely advance in a landscape that is covered in the snow and ice. Feet, fingers, and parts of their ears are prone to frostbite. Whoever falls asleep in the snow never wakes up again. The Russians are used to this cold and they fight back without mercy. Another slap in the face is when the news comes in that Reimond Tollenaere, the leader of the VNV, who left to fight at the front as well, was killed in action. He was killed by friendly fire, by grenades of the Spanish Blue Division. Tollenaere was only 30 years old and leaves a wife and three kids behind. In Podberesje, a godforsaken town in Russia, Oswald sees the temporary grave of his mentor. It makes him sick. But it's not the only thing that shocks him in the small village. Against the church wall, he sees the mutilated bodies of German soldiers. Ears, hands, genitals are cut off and some of the soldiers were naked and were doused with water and thrown in the freezing cold. There's not a lot of time to reflect on the situation as he needs to see to survive the cold of the night. He spends the night in the church and covers himself with the letters from the Feldpost (field post) – who had just arrived that day - to keep himself a little bit warm, just like a blanket.

The losses are enormous and Oswald notices how the Spanish troops of the Blue Division are demoralized. In search of shelter he busts into a bunker one day and to his surprise he sees Spanish soldiers sitting there making wooden crosses. They don't even look up to him as he enters the bunker. They already made the crosses for their fallen comrades and now they were making their own crosses! But the cruelty of war becomes even worse. He needs to stand guard behind a wall of bodies of Russian soldiers. They build the wall with bodies for their own protection. This image of an arm sticking out of the wall of bodies haunts him for years to come. In March 1942 a more euphorically moment occurs when the Flemish Legion - coming from Wesky - conquers the Russian positions in Semtitzky. When that night an unsuspecting Russian returned from another mission, on his skies, all of a sudden he sees a man in German uniform lying on the ground bringing up his rifle and takes aim. A shot was heard. Right next to Oswald a dead Russian soldier falls down on the ground; one of Oswald's comrades shot the Russian before he could shoot Oswald. He saved Oswald's life! He searched the Russian and he finds a couple of pictures on the dead soldier. He takes one of the pictures and puts it away in his pocket. Even years after the war he still has the picture, it still hangs above his bed, as a sign of good luck.

After two months of hard combat, the battle is temporarily over for Oswald. He sustains injuries from a grenade shell that hit his foot and he has frostbite on both feet. He's allowed to rest now. Besides the heavy losses, the men were happy to learn that in the Wehrmacht Bulletin in Berlin it was announced that the Flemish Legion was able to capture Semtitzy.

You start to reflect about what happened years later; actually, the older you get the more you think about it. How crazy was I... shooting at unknown people, and you're not even mad at them. It's almost like being at a shooting range where you just try to hit the target. The Russians had white camouflage uniforms; we held our rifles up toward the trees as they were brown in color. When the tree all of a sudden became white in color we knew we had to shoot. We knew that a Russian was walking by the tree. When the tree became brown again after firing a shot, we knew we hit him. Horrible...just horrible!

But I feel no remorse. For years I comforted myself with the thought that if I didn't pull the trigger that he would do it. I still think about it every night, when I lie awake. I'm a convinced pacifist now, I hate war; you can see it as a kid that burned his fingers while playing with fire and that never wants to play with fire again. But I don't feel sorry for what I've done. I was convinced that I was fighting for the right cause.

March 1943: the battle at Krasny Bor, the end of the Flemish Legion.

Oswald's life at the front is different in the way that he fights, gets injured, can go home on leave, and finally has to go to Berlin where he is trained to become a Kriegsberichterstatter or war correspondent. One of his finest moments for him is when he's at Pushkin – Tsarskoje Selo – which is the nice country residence of the 18th-century Tsarina, which is located at about 20 Km south of Leningrad. He interviews the architect of the chateau and he has pictures taken of him while he's standing at the entrance gate. The pictures seem to be more like vacation pictures!

A Kriegsberichterstatter is called half a soldier by the others because they don't engage fully in combat. However, Oswald gets hit during an attack while he's working as a journalist. While putting pressure on his bleeding arm he has to walk to the front doctor during the night and after a while, the walking becomes stumbling. The doctor was a few kilometers behind the front lines and when Oswald arrived at the field hospital he lost consciousness. A few days later he woke up and until today he can't remember where he had been that night before arriving at the field hospital.

It becomes really dangerous when he and his colleague Kriegsberichterstatter Harry De Booy went to Krasny Bor. The Russians try to break out of the siege of Leningrad with their famous T34 tanks, and the Germans are doing whatever they can to hold their positions by counter-attacking with their Tiger tanks. The road from Leningrad to Moscow seems to become a road of death at Krasny Bor; at the right side of the road new troops, ammo, and tanks are being sent to the front while at the left side soldiers are piling up the dead and wounded. The view is horrible. Tanks are coming from all sides and the noise is unbearable.

Harry De Booy doesn't want to be called half a soldier and engages in combat. He tries to stop a few Russian tanks with anti-tank mines. Unfortunately, he gets hit by a tank grenade – most likely shrapnel - and he dies in Oswald's arms, with his last words saying "Oswald, Oswald,..." Oswald is deeply affected by what happened to his friend. Harry was a flamboyant fellow who was in the prime of his life. He was a real lady's killer with his black hair; the Don Juan of the Legion. Not even half an hour before his death Harry told him that he was in serious troubles because he was married in Antwerp, had to marry in Hamburg, and wanted to get married in Berlin. Oswald told him that there was only one solution and that was to get killed in action... Oswald was also injured by the tank grenade. He sustained injuries to his left leg, elbow, and face. He's able to get into safety and is able to get to the field hospital thanks to the ride he could get in the radio car of a Swedish war correspondent.

The Russians are prevented to break through the lines, for now, however bit by bit they gain ground. The losses are dramatic. The Flemish Legion ceases to exist and from what's left of it is added to the strength of the SS Sturmbrigade Langemarck. Oswald remains war correspondent until 1943 when he gets called back to attend officer's school. Oswald experiences the end of the war as an officer of the Flemish Youth battalion. He's in charge of a platoon of forty young volunteers and even when it's generally known that the war is over and lost, they get deployed at the Oder front. Most of the boys are only 16 or 17 years old when they get involved in the fighting at the front... There's no way back now. Only the ones that were 15 years old were left behind at the barracks because they were too young. Even with the promise that no more Flemish blood would be spilled are the losses tremendously high.

After the war in Germany and Belgium.

The battle has been fought and the war was lost. Rather than to surrender to the Allies – or even worse: to the Russians – the Waffen SS soldier is thinking about committing suicide. Actually, he had thought about that when he was just a couple of weeks at the front when he had seen the brutality and horror of war. With a little bit of luck, he's able to get into the French sector of occupied Germany. He lives in hiding under a false name, Hans Richter, and builds up his life again as a carpenter in the Black forest together with his German wife. Then he makes plans to flee to Argentina however his mother is able to convince him to report himself to the Belgian authorities. In 1949 he returns to Belgium and is convicted up to 3 years of imprisonment. He sits one year in prison, the Gentse Nieuwe Wandeling, together with his father and Hendrik Elias, the successor of Staf De Clerq. The war left Oswald many scars on his body but the most fascinating one is the one on his left upper arm. Once there was a letter "O" tattooed, his blood type, which was a common practice with the Waffen SS. This way they could easily perform blood transfusions on the battlefield. After the war, he cut the piece of skin away. To camouflage it a little bit more he had some more skin removed 2 cm under the initial mark so he could tell that a bullet hit him in the arm.

He realized, during the war, that opponents of the regime and Jews were imprisoned in concentration camps. Anti-Semitism was very strong and widely spread all

over Europe. Even during the May days in 1940, the Belgian police had arrested and deported Jews. Personally, Oswald never had any problems with Jews. On the contrary, he had a very good relationship with the Jewish stepfather of one of his best friends. Oswald never knew that there were also extermination camps. He came to this cruel discovery after the war and he then realized that he had fought for a criminal regime. “I needed a very long time to let this sink in.”

It was the last wish of the former soldier to visit the graves of his fallen comrades in Russia and to pay his respects to them. He bought flowers for them, flowers that he bought in Russia; however, they were bearing the yellow and black ribbons with the writing on it “Graves in the East – A salute from Flanders.” Oswald and his comrades remember their fallen comrades and their fallen opponents every year. “It is very important to remember ALL victims of war.” Oswald never had any issues with his past. He never had. “There is no homesickness or nostalgia. Of course, we were naive back then and we were used and abused. Great countries have no friends, only self-interest. It is still like that these days. We are happy that we live in an open, democratic society however the message from Reimond Tollenaere is still very relevant to me: “We strive to an equal position for Flanders in a new Europe.” To say it the way I feel it: from cradle to the coffin, I remain a Flemish Nationalist!”



Waffen SS soldiers close to Leningrad 1943 – source unknown



Two Fallschirmjäger: Walter and Gunther, two worlds apart.

The following stories are from two Fallschirmjäger or paratroopers. One would think that these men would work for the same unit or division however that was not the case here. The first Fallschirmjäger was with the SS Fallschirmjägerbataillon 500/600. This unit received the same training as their Luftwaffe colleagues however they were, as the name states, part of the SS. The other Fallschirmjäger was part of the 3rd Company Fallschirmjäger of the Luftwaffe. Both men were doing the same job but were fighting on different fronts. These two stories have been carefully chosen to compare the different deployments of these Fallschirmjäger.

Walter Redeker, SS Unterscharführer in the SS Fallschirmjägerbataillon 500/600

Walter Redeker received his training at the SS regiment Nuremberg as a radio operator or Funker. At the end of 1943, he volunteered for a transfer to an SS paratrooper battalion. The fat Herman Göring – that’s how Walter called the Chief of the Luftwaffe – was not keen to have Waffen SS paratroopers amongst his regular paratroopers. After his paratrooper training, he jumped in Yugoslavia on partisan leader Tito’s headquarters. He survived this risky operation and fought on many other fronts in the East. He was imprisoned four times during the war but he was able to escape three times! He survived the war.

“I was born in 1926 and I was one of the youngest members of our battalion. All the other comrades were older. Can you imagine how old they are today? We are the only witnesses to what happened back in our days. The lies that have been told about us go beyond imagination and made us look very bad however we know what really happened back in those days. I can say we were very patriotic and it makes me happy to see so many young comrades in Germany today who can still think and feel like a German and that

they can remain a German. Every generation is different. In my time we were brought up with the Hitlerjugend. In the Hitlerjugend, I found my first home. It was normal that after the Hitlerjugend you – as a Hitlerjugend leader - joined the Waffen SS. So I did the same, I reported for duty to the Waffen SS however the officer in charge laughed and told me to come back when I was 16. I was only 14 years old when I first tried to get in! With every important state visit from a foreign leader like Mussolini, Daladier, Chamberlain, we were always there to hold the masses of people who wanted to get close to these famous politicians. I still remember what a feeling it was when the entire mass of people yelled “Sieg Heil!” It was phenomenal! I finally joined the Waffen SS as a Funker or Radio Operator however in 1943 I volunteered for the Waffen SS Fallschirmjäger. We arrived at our battalion with only black collar tabs on our uniforms. No SS runes or other markings so the commander of the unit asked us at the parade if we were punished? “Actually nobody was punished, Sir!” He couldn’t believe it as we had no insignia on our collar tabs. Most of the people there thought we were all punished...as if we were a “Strafbataillon” or punishment Battalion. After a while, we were transported to [Mataruška Banja](#) in Yugoslavia. There we went into Fallschirmjäger Ausbildung or paratrooper training. This was better known as the Luftwaffe Fallschirmsprungschule 3 or Air Force Paratrooper Training School 3. It was also in Yugoslavia that I saw my first casualties of war by partisans. Three German officers were killed by them.

We had to do six jumps, they were mandatory. You had to do them to become the Fallschirmschützenabzeichen or paratrooper insignia. After these six jumps we were given the Fallschirmschützenabzeichen but after 4 weeks we had to give it back because our fat Reichsmarschall Herman Göring thought it was not right that members of the Waffen SS would carry this insignia that was supposed to be only for his Luftwaffe troops!



Waffen SS Fallschirmjäger in [Mataruška Banja](#) 1943 – source unknown.

Yugoslavia – attacking Tito’s partisans

One of our engagements at the front as Fallschirmjäger was the attack on Tito's headquarters. Tito was the partisan leader in Yugoslavia. We took off with two groups, I was in group one. Before we jumped out of our planes our bombers dropped a significant number of bombs on Tito's headquarters – the area we had to land. This was a good thing because group one was able to land without being shot! All members of group one were able to land uninjured. However, some of the transport planes crashed and the crew was lost. We entered Tito's headquarter however he was long gone before we arrived. Tito got away and fled towards the Adriatic coast. The advantage we had was that we seized Tito's headquarters which had a huge storage of ammunition.



SS Fallschirmjäger during operation Rösselsprung in 1944 – Courtesy of the Bundesarchiv

During our attack, our battalion lost about 96 comrades while the partisans lost probably 3 to 4 thousand people. We had the advantage that we were on a little hill so that the partisans had to run up the hill to attack us. It was obviously easy for us to fight them that way however our ammunition was getting low. We continued fighting them until the early morning hours but to be able to continue fighting we had to take the ammunition of the dead or wounded. Lots of partisans got killed that day – it was a horrible sight - but all of a sudden the attack stopped. We stood up from our positions – not really knowing what was going on - and we looked down the hill. All partisans were gone! It became clear to us that these partisans were also attacked from behind and from both flanks. We noticed that it was a Spähtrupp or Reconnaissance patrol of the Kroatische Freiwilligen Division. They fired a flare so that we would recognize them. But eventually, the first troops that got us out there was a battalion of Brandenburg Regiment of the Wehrmacht! The Brandenburger was a special unit and they also had paratroopers in their ranks. After this battle, we went back to Mataruška Banja and then we were transported to Neustrelitz to our new garrison. For our actions, we received the Iron Cross 2nd Class and the Allgemeine Sturmabzeichen or General Assault Badge.

Budapest - Hungary

The Hungarian government was ready to make a deal with the Soviet Union and we had to prevent that of happening. So we were flown to Hungary, to Budapest to be precise. While approaching our jump zone we all got ready inside our Junker, the door went open and we were just waiting for the light to go on. But the light never went on and an NCO came to us from the front of the plane telling us not to jump because we were going to land! When we touched the ground the first thing that we did was to unarm the Hungarian officers. We took away their pistols. Why? Because the Hungarians were a proud people and they had magnificent pistols. At parade we were told to come back in ten minutes and that all pistols that we took from the Hungarians better be lying on the table as the Hungarians wanted their weapons back. If we failed to comply with this order the following 48 hours would be very hard for us as we wouldn't get any sleep for that period of time! All pistols were returned of course!

We stayed in a hotel in Budapest and we stayed there for 3 to 4 weeks. It was like a holiday. We fought some partisans and maybe we lost 3 or 4 men during these four weeks. The Hungarians promised not to close a pact with the Soviets and things were back to normal.

Lithuania

We were engaged in Lithuania where we had to fight the advancing Russians. The Russians were approaching our positions with T34 tanks. Because the infantry support was too far away from our location, we had to hold the attack. That day we shot numerous T34 tanks however they kept coming! It was there where I was wounded because of a T34 grenade that exploded close to me. It hit me in the knee and by the evening my knee was so big that in the field hospital they wanted to amputate my leg. I told them not to amputate but they wanted to proceed with it. Luckily, I had a pistol and I threatened them with it if they would amputate my leg. Because of that, I received penicillin and my leg healed. I was found fit for combat again and joined my comrades on the battlefield. I received the wounded badge for my injuries and we all were awarded the Nahkampfspange or Close Combat Clasp for our actions against the T34 tanks.

Germany

Back in Germany – in the Oberpfalz - we went back to our unit. It became clear that we would participate in the battle in the Ardennes, the Ardennen Einsatz or Battle of the Bulge. From the high command we, Waffen SS and Wehrmacht members, were asked

if there were any English-speaking members. The ones that were able to speak English would get an American uniform. These uniforms were taken from POWs or were specially made for this operation. They would also get captured American vehicles and weapons! This operation was called Unternehmen Greiff. To be honest with you this operation was a fiasco and most of the participants got captured and killed. One day I was asked by an officer if I had family members in the US. I said yes, in Toledo and my mother lives in Colombia. Because of this, they didn't want me involved in this operation as they feared for repercussions toward family members in the Americas if I'd get caught.

In American captivity

I was in a POW camp in Beckendorf. There we were packed with twelve people in cells that were meant for only six people. There was only one window which was closed all the time and locked with a big lock. Only one hour per day they would open the window to get some fresh air inside. One day the camp commander walked by with his German mother. We heard the Americans yell to this lady, in German, not to get too close to the camp as the smell there was so much worse than in a KZ (concentration camp)! I was transferred to DFC-22 POW a while later. The camp commander surprisingly spoke perfect German and when we arrived in the camp the first thing he asked us was "Are you a bunch of bread bags or SS?" For the commander, the bread bags were members of the Wehrmacht and SS were something special! However, the camp was very good and I had lots of respect for the commander, whom I met again years later. One Sunday every prisoner received two Krapfen (German Donut). We were with 20,000 prisoners in that POW camp however every prisoner received two Krapfen! Do you realize how much work that is to bake this Krapfen for 20,000 prisoners? I'm sure they had some help from a few prisoners however I still don't know how they did it. For us, it felt like if it was Christmas that day. How they managed to get the Krapfen for every prisoner I absolutely don't know but it was an honorable gesture to all of us. I stayed in that camp for 4 to 5 months.

To conclude I have to say that war is horrible. During the war, not everybody died because of bravery. I think 20% of the soldiers died of stupidity because they were careless and didn't think about certain situations. War is about survival and you live from day to day. If you don't shoot your enemy he will shoot you..."

Gunther Hornig, a Luftwaffe Fallschirmjäger, 3rd Kp Fallschirmjäger - Luftwaffe



FJ Gunther A. Hornig – Courtesy of his son Gunther Hornig

Gunther A. Hornig was born in Dresden on the 4th of March 1923. When the war started on the 1st of September in 1939 he was 16 years of age. In 1941 he was called into arms and joined the Wehrmacht. He enlisted on 18 August 1941. With Identification Number 1074 he joined the 4th Flieger Training Regiment. After he received his training he was dispatched on September the 2nd - 1941 and joined up with the 5th company Flieger training Regiment 82 based in Wurzen, Germany. The Town of Wurzen lies 100 kilometers from his hometown, Dresden. From the city of Wurzen Gunther was attached to the 3rd company Fallschirmjäger (paratroopers) and received a mechanical training. After that, he was based in Helmstedt Germany, located between Magdeburg and Hannover. This relocation happened on the 2nd of March 1942.

France

From Helmstedt the company was sent to the French town of Vire, near Caen. By this time he worked with the bakery company of the Flieger division. The bakery company literally cooked for the company. His assignment in France started on 13 June 1942. From Vire, the company hooked up with the 7th Flieger Division.

Russia

From the end of 1942 until April 1943 the 7th Flieger Division was deployed with the 9th Army in Russia. The 9th Army was part of Army Group Centre during the Russian campaign. In the winter of 1942, the 9th Army dug in, in the proximity of the town of Rzhev, some 300 kilometers from Moscow, and kept their ground against the Russian army throughout the winter. Rzhev was known for the many Soviet losses and it was called the "Rzhev Meat Grinder" for a reason! In 1943 it became the biggest German army in Russia and took part in the Battle of Kursk.

Back In France

In April 1943 the division was sent back to France. With Identification number Id.no144/214029 Gunther was still with the Bakery Company of the 1st Fallschirmjäger division. He was promoted on 17 July 1943 to Gefreiter. The company was stationed in the French town of Dreux some 80 kilometers south west of Paris.

Italy

From November 1943, the division was sent to the town of Aquila in Italy, 210 kilometers northeast from Rome. In December they were relocated to Ferrara in Italy. On the night of 9 to 10 July Operation Husky started, the Allied forces tried to take Sicily and get a foothold in Italy. In late July the 1st Fallschirmjäger Division was flown in to reinforce the German defenders on the Island.

The 1st Fallschirmjäger Division had a major part in the defense of Italy as they took part in the Battle of Sicily. After the Allies achieved a breakthrough at the beachhead in Anzio, which was the first major invasion of the Italian – and European - mainland, they helped to defend the Gustav Line in January 1944. In February 1944 they were moved out from the Gustav Line and shifted their defense to the monastery of Monte Cassino. The division put up a ferocious defense in the heavily bombed monastery. The division held out until 17th of May 1944. After 4 major battles, they got flanked by the Polish and had to withdraw to the north of Rome.

Gunther was dispatched to the 1st Fallschirmjäger Company with Identification number L21063, leaving the bakery company behind. In November 1944 he was promoted to Obergefreiter.

POW and Back Home

After the 1st Fallschirmjäger division pulled out of Monte Cassino they moved further North to the Apennine Mountains South of Bologna. Throughout the winter the frontline was static, the 1st Fallschirmjäger Division was reduced after the Italian campaign. They now formed part of the German 1st Fallschirmjäger Corps of the 4th Fallschirmjäger Division. After the winter they were deployed at the Adriatic coast in Italy, from where they were forced a steady retreat, pushed back by the advancing British

8th Army. The German surrender came on 2 May 1945, however by that time Gunther was already taken as a prisoner of war. He was taken prisoner on the 23rd of April in 1945 by American Forces in the Italian town of Imola. After the war, he was a driver for the American army in Munich and was discharged in 1947. Gunther died on the 7th of August in 1995 at the age of 72.



The story of Sergio

This is the story of Sergio, an Italian Waffen SS volunteer. Coming from a small town in northern Italy he joined the Italian army at the beginning of the war. His entire family were true followers of fascism and joining the Italian Army was a great honor. As a soldier of the regular Italian Army he fought in the Alps – close to the French border - against the French. One day there were posted on a mountain flank and, funny enough, they had a French camp right next to theirs. Both sides swapped food and had the greatest

war stories to tell to each other. Even when their countries were at war the regular soldier didn't care about politics. They were in the same position, the one of being a soldier. They understood each other and they knew that the problems that were going on were caused by the leaders of their countries. After one night of sharing food together and telling stories, they all went to sleep. Both sides had a good night sleep because they were never woken by the bombers that flew over that night. Early in the morning, he got up and he noticed that all the French were gone. Not a trace left of them...except for what was left of them a few hundred meters down the mountain. The bombers that flew over that night dropped their deadly cargo on the French camp killing the French soldiers. He said the site was horrible, to see all these dead people...and what did they die for? The Italians left and continued their way into France. In fact, an address was given to them in Paris but they never got there. Then the tide changed for the Italians when Italy surrendered to the Allies...



Italian Waffen SS (notice the different color of the collar tab – source unknown).

In 1943 the Italian Army signed the armistice and the German Armed Forces started to disarm the Italians. But for him, the war wasn't over and he joined the Italian Waffen SS at that time. The Allies were advancing north in Italy and his unit was engaged against several Allied units. One day they were fighting in a town against the English Armed Forces. After some heavy fighting, it became clear that the Allies were too strong and that resistance was futile. Instead of leading the entire company into its total destruction the men decided to surrender. Sergio and his comrades were waiting inside the church for the English to arrive so that they could surrender. It was inside the church that they surrendered to the English. Of course, the English were not at their ease when dealing with Waffen SS soldiers so the rifles were held at the ready. All the men were ordered to put their weapons down and to put their hands up. While putting their hands up Sergio's watch became visible. This, of course, caught the eye of one of the British soldiers and he ordered Sergio to take the watch off and to give it to him. Sergio looked at him for a while and the British soldier repeated again that he wanted the watch. Now he pointed his rifle towards Sergio and told him he would get shot if he failed to comply. Sergio remained utterly calm and told the British soldier: "If you really want it then come and get it!"

Sergio kept his watch. After the surrender, they were put in a POW camp from which he escaped twice. The first time they went after him and they were able to catch him pretty quick. After his first escape, he was put back into the POW camp but this time under more surveillance. The British wanted to prevent him or other prisoners to escape again. Sergio didn't want to stay into captivity and he told his comrades that he had plans to escape again. His friends told him that he might get shot this time but Sergio didn't care about it. His goal was to go home as the war was over now. For him, there was no point to remain a prisoner. He asked his comrades who would join him but he didn't get any response from them. One day he decided to escape again. His second escape was successful and he went back home. The British never came after him again. When I asked Sergio about the war and the battles he was in, he told me he had never fired his rifle. Maybe he said so because of the horrible things he had seen during the war. This will remain a mystery forever as he passed away in the early '90s. But one day he was telling me that back in those days in the Alps, while he was talking to a French soldier, the French soldier was utterly interested in his rifle because he had a scope on it. Was Sergio a sniper? Who knows? Only he knows...



The story of Abel Delannoy

The front was far away, and we could only see the trajectories of departing V2 rockets that had their objective hundreds of kilometers from here. Our underfed horses

were even more miserable than us. When the road in front of us became a skating rink we helped the horses carry some of the load. It's because we were pulling those damn "Infanteriekarren", or infantry wagons, that we were able to reach our objective...with our average speed dropping to 2 km/h. Talking about a Blitzkrieg!

Comrade "GDB", the "leader of festivities" of Neweklau and adjutant of the commander, whose bureaucratic qualities perfectly reflected his position, gave us our orders in just 5 points but with even missing one comma!

After we had exhausted ourselves after long marches to break the immense front, the high command finally sent us to Pomerania. The Russian tanks were galloping like crazy towards Pomerania. Towns were abandoned in a rush and wagons were filled with refugees, forming long columns of sadness. Our convoy stopped at Stettin. I was the officer in charge and I had some privileges on some motorized units. I had to contact a certain general who was organizing a catastrophic defense of the sector in Stettin. He was thrilled when he heard about the arrival of the 28th Walloon Division. "One division...but where is your artillery?" We have gunners but no cannons General! The war was evolving so fast that we had no time to receive a full formation of men and the necessary equipment. Now we were ending the war, like infantrymen, just like the old guys had started it on August 8, 1941." The general was very disappointed. Didn't he read Schiller? "With or without artillery, my respect for him...he's a Walloon after all." But there were better men than this uneducated general in the train station of Stettin: a train full of young Germans serving in anti-aircraft batteries. They were assisted by some Luftwaffe reserve troops, who had – I hope – some common sense otherwise it would turn out into a catastrophe!

The other regiment landed in Stargard which was the "center of gravity" of our sector. My battalion, unfortunately, had to march from – as usual – from Stettin to Stargard. I preceded them in a motorcycle of the general staff, doing 80 Km/h. We were going to "install" us in Schöneberg, which was a comfortable Pomeranian property. It was the property and residence of a count who was also the mayor of the town. He invited all officers for dinner before he left. After dinner I was looking around to find accommodation for my battalion and for this I was helped by a nice, good looking guide. Even if she wasn't blond, Anni was a very "hot" brunette who had stayed behind in Schöneberg to work as a telephone operator. When I was about to leave when she smiled at me and I couldn't resist to kiss her. It was a kiss perfumed of ripe apricots, what am I saying, it was more like strawberries! A kiss like this had to be the start of a passionate relationship however the circumstances weren't favorable and the war didn't permit me to walk with her in the moonlight, like in a perfect romantic picture. Anni left the village a little later... I wrote her every day until the day that my colleague Cremer of the General Staff – damn these guys! – who was laughing with me and said: "Anni! Ha ha ha! I accompanied her to Stargard when she was evacuated!"

Just when the battalion had arrived in Schöneberg I received a phone call early at night from the General Staff. I had to go to Stargard to pick up the orders asap! Therefore, I left with the commander's Opel this time. In Stargard I learned that a Russian tank

column was rolling through the province – which had no natural barriers – just like Rommel. They were approaching the town and the battalion had to come back to Stargard immediately! They had to form a protective line together with the other units in Stargard. I returned to Schöneberg and in the commotion when the men heard the news, our unfortunate infantry had to take the road back and do all these kilometers all over again. At daybreak we were in position on a slight elevation just before Stargard, We were able to see the “tanks of the Apocalypse” coming towards us. Suddenly Stukas (dive bombers) flew over our heads and started attacking the tanks. They said it was Rudel and his men. BANG! BANG! BANG! Siegfried’s sword fell on them with such a magnitude; it fell on those who were about to conquer the world. The tanks, attacked by hellfire, were all transformed into big balls of fire. The nightmare started to fade away. Thank you, you friendly birds.

Wallonien – Langemarck: the first encounter.

We returned to the Schöneberg sector. There we knew that our Flemish comrades were at our left, in the area of Zachan, however, the support point was very remote between us – a couple of kilometers for sure. I was given a platoon of heavy machine guns to which I assigned some of the old guys of the 4th platoon of Baibusy, who in the meantime were promoted to sergeant and leader of the group. We were about to occupy a town where there were only some old guys left of the Volkssturm, who were more than happy to shake hands with conscientious and organized warriors! It seemed that some Russian patrols engaged the town every night and defending the town with only 30 men was not a piece of cake. During the chaos of the evacuation, the electricity hadn’t been shut off and the phones were still working. I played my little game to put all the lights on in town and let the radios play extremely loud. Then I placed a sentinel at the very entrance of the ghost town and I place one at the hotel where we were staying. Weapons and ammunition were in reach of hand so if necessary, we could defend our positions and create a little fort in case things were getting serious. But the night passed without any incidents. The next day I was checking weapons that were given to us: grenade launchers, Panzerfausts, etc. This made my day! Suddenly a patrol of Feldgrau showed up who identified themselves very quickly as soldiers of the Langemarck who were in position in the neighboring town. They were alarmed by the commotion and they wanted to know what was going on. They were under command of a young Unterscharführer from Brussels who spoke French fluently. We were happy to encounter our brothers of the low lands who were also engaged in the campaign of the East, since 1941, but who were sometimes so far away from us. I invited him inside for a drink in our hotel where the basement was filled with bottles of wine from the Rhine and Mosel region; the only problem was that the bottles had no labels on them. We drank how they taught us during the “Heerwesen” training or military training. I drank a bit from my first glass and it was horrible! I burnt my throat and stomach; it wasn’t wine at all! It was some sort of +90 degrees alcohol. I apologized for the fact that I had nothing better to offer to my guests but my guests didn’t seem to have such a sensitive palate as mine as they were asking if they could have a couple of bottles. They said they were going to mix this “spirit” with fruit juice, sugar, and some other things. Then they invited us to come and visit them in

their town. Without a doubt, we drank this mixture on several occasions. What touched me the most during our visit to their town was to find that “Breughelienne” atmosphere, an almost relaxed atmosphere compared to us. It smelled so good there, like steak and fries and just like us they were singing songs – but in their own language – about “the bowl and the straw mattress is our ideals.” Our Flemish comrades were at our side on April 20, 1945, in Schillendorf – Pommelen during the counter-attack lead by our battalion against the Soviets who crossed the Oder River. Later we would see our Flemish comrades back in Belgium, in the prisons of St Gillis, Petit-Chateau, and the Beverloo camp. I want to take the opportunity to commend their “esprit de corps” toward us while we were in prison. We were greeted there by real gentlemen who were Flemish idealists of the European war of 1941-1945.

False alarm.

The front line wasn't really set yet and the two armies were still putting their pawns on the chess board. We received a visit from two Schützenpanzerwagen, which is an armored troop transport vehicle. They were armed with a 20mm FLAK, a triple piece on a trailer, and a single piece on another trailer. They were sent to us as reconnaissance to inform the general at Stargard and to give him a clearer view of the situation. The officer in charge of the group was a young Wehrmacht officer. Probably he had never seen any action before because he was hoping to see some action in our sector. By the look on the faces of the older soldiers of his group, it was clear that they didn't share his opinion. Probably those veterans have seen it all since 1939. Then another convoy arrived. Our sector seemed to be swamped with new arrivals. This time a group of reconnaissance vehicles arrived; other Wehrmacht troops. They were driving some sort of Volkswagen amphibious vehicles. Equipment, uniforms,... all brand new. These soldiers were all young boys and clearly just came out of school. The officer in charge was, ironically, Herr Professor. Poor Germany, where are your courageous grenadiers of Leningrad, Sebastopol, and Stalingrad? The men of Mr. Professor said they saw some Russians on the bridge at Ihna, just a couple of kilometers away from our positions. With my entire battalion and the new guys, we made a movement towards the location where they said they saw the Russians. We had to go through a forest where there was an abandoned farm. The drivers of the armored vehicles didn't like to drive to a forest because there they were easy targets for bazookas. We knew that the farm was abandoned and we assured them to cover their flanks. So we covered their flanks and they were more at ease now knowing we were covering them. Then we stopped and I looked through my binoculars. In the distance, I saw some pirate-like shapes moving around through my lenses... “Those, Russians?” They were our troops! I advanced and I signaled at them. They responded. “They are legionnaires of the 69th Regiment who are taking positions on that site, Herr Professor! Clearly, you failed your exam in Aufklärung – getting information about the enemy.” The professor replied to me: “Ach Herr Delannoy, you're so lucky to have veterans in your ranks. It's obvious that the art of war cannot be taught at the university.”

Lindenberg – Jacques Poels

The tanks of the Frundsberg Division were attacking towards Arnswalde, a small village

that was encircled and that had to clear. The 7th Company of the 69th Regiment took a position at Lindenberg – on a little hill covered with linden trees – who had to cover the flank during this attack. The Soviets sent their tanks to crush our troops, which at that time had no access to heavy weapons. Unterscharführer Jacques Poels came out of his fox hole, holding a Panzerfaust in his hands, with the intention to destroy one of the attacking Russian tanks. Unfortunately, he was spotted by a couple of Russian tanks. Jacques took a direct hit and exploded with the Panzerfaust. In Neweklau, the poor Jacques got “hit” several times during drill practice. The Junkerschaftsführer, Paul S., who was the most Prussian off the four instructors, regularly sent him on the roof of the changing rooms at the soccer field. Then, when he was sitting on the roof, he had to sing out loud to remind his comrades what could happen to them if they were not paying attention during training. It is that image of him that stayed with me, that image of a nice person, who had something in him, like many of our comrades did. That’s how I remember him... The commander of the battalion, Lakai, from which the 7th Company was part of, asked for an officer to replace Poels. I was the “lucky” one. I was sad to leave my platoon who had become my family. When I arrived in Kremzov, at night, the 7th Company was no more.

Kremzov.

I presented myself at the battalion’s office where the adjutant registered me in the battalion’s book. Without even looking at my Soldbuch he asked me: “Aren’t you the son of Louis Delannoy?” Just to make clear, due to the time and the amount of alcohol in the adjutant’s body, he apparently forgot the rank that I held. “Yes I am”, I replied. He approached me full of joy – I think. This adjutant, Robert Degand, was a native from my home town who apparently had fought with my father during the war of 1914-1918. His disrespectful attitude towards my rank changed into a certain friendship, which would benefit both of us in the near future. Degand had access to the general staff’s food provisions. “You give me meat and I’ll provide you with plenty of alcohol.” I just encouraged his vice for alcohol.

My platoon came to join me to fill up the “hole” that was left by the 21st Battalion. We installed our heavy machine guns in strategic points all over the town. Even if the front was pretty quiet and calm, I made sure my men were alert all the time and ready for battle. I made them dig in and set up small fortifications in preparation for the iron hurricane that was coming our way. Then a German came into our no man’s land that night. He didn’t know the answer to our special signal of one of my sentinels, or maybe he didn’t understand what the Sentinel said, and he got himself killed by a German bullet. We heard him running through the hall of a house before. He was a big man, a farmer’s type, as many of the German soldiers, were. He had put civilian clothes over his uniform so he could - I think – go unnoticed through the Russian lines. His luck abandoned him just at the last moment.

I found myself in Block #5, the signal house on the railway line Stargard – Arnswald. I told my men to take cover and dig fox holes close to the signal house. It was time: the front line came closer and closer and we had to get ready to defend our positions in Stargard. In the meantime, the Russians put some canons somewhere near the Kollin

area. These cannons, type PaK, took the railway line and the signal house under direct fire. My men could barely move and I tried to see how they were holding up. Two or three grenades exploded close to me – what a luxury! – however, it gave me a better view of the entire situation. In the meantime, some German “Pioniere” blew up the railway. They did a nice job destroying the tracks while other German troops were digging trenches like moles. They were busy day and night but they were damn fast! We – the regular infantry soldiers – could definitely learn something from these men. It was thanks to them that we had a trench running from the field between Kremzov and Block #5. This trench line was solely occupied by the men of Decoux and Bonetti with a heavy machine gun until the moment we had to leave.

The blond Austrian knight.

A German fighter plane launched itself on a formation of Russian planes, but no miracle happened here. The Messerschmitt crashed close to the houses in Kremzov. The pilot was able to bail out and some of our men ran towards him to help him as soon as he would touch the ground. But these idiots started discharging their firearms in the air, just like a bunch of cowboys, making the pilot think that he was going to land in a Russian occupied zone. He released himself from his chute at approximately 30 meters above the ground and he came down like a big bag of sand. When the men approached him, he was moaning and some pink/reddish foam came out of his mouth. There were no more meds in town and we couldn't take care of him properly. He was evacuated from the crash scene on a wheelbarrow and transported to the little station in Kremzov. There he was put into a railway wagon.

We took advantage of the darkness to get to Schneidersfeld. Sergeant Deprez, my adjutant, had already left to go and help Lt Schumacher who had taken command of a unit that got lost during combat. The men of the 2nd group were dug in at Block #5; I joined them back during darkness so I could give them their instructions. The 3rd group was all alone in the middle of that long trench. We all had to wait for hour “H” before we could move towards the train station in Stettin from where we would move towards Schneidersfeld. I was all alone in my little station and I was worried about what could happen to my “children” that were all spread out in the field. In the meantime, the young pilot's suffering had ended. I dug his grave but before I put him down to rest and I wrote down his name, date of birth, and date of death in a file. I removed his shoes and clothes – they had fur in it! – because they would come in handy for one of my men in the near future. “Young knight of my era, I'm sure you wouldn't mind me taking this from you.” I kept his compass and his ID card, which had no military information on it but an address of his parents in Graz. I would send them his belongings with a letter of condolences at my arrival in Stettin.

There was the first batch of my “lost children” that arrived together with Schumacher, who was wounded but managed to get his company out of the action. They also had to be thankful to our loyal Felix Deprez who helped them out! Those from Block #5 arrived as well. From where the 3rd group was posted we could hear machine gun fire rattling. Damn! Probably they were surprised by the Russians! Then there was silence.

Suddenly, out of the darkness, the men of the 3rd group appeared. A Russian patrol had come out to pick a fight with them but they were able to fight them off and chase them away before they left their positions!

Schneidersfeld

Whether we went to Schneidersfeld or other places, we used the trenches dug by these tireless “moles”. We had no canons anymore as they were all destroyed, one by one, during the numerous fights. In the field, I noticed Roger G., who was a 20mm FLAK specialist. The Legion had no FLAK guns available when we left Stettin however the men discovered a couple of crashed Luftwaffe planes from which they salvaged the guns. These were the guns they were using now! The trenches were mostly occupied by Raphael Roryck’s 61st Company. The manpower of Kampfgruppe Lakai was already heavily reduced in numbers. The telephone operators installed themselves in a crater. Commander Lakai called me from Wittichow – from his command post – asking me to inform him about the situation at the front. “I just noticed Russian soldiers getting off their trucks in Kremzov, walking in long, unprotected, lines. It seems the Russians have no artillery with them, but neither do we!” After this phone call, I rejoined my men in the field when all of a sudden the “Waltz of the little prunes” began. Every Soviet soldier had a machine pistol that was holding 72 rounds! These machine pistols were capable to destroy your face in a fraction of a second. Dufour’s MG jammed and he had to take the piece out for repairs. He came out of his cover and ran towards a safer place to be able to work on his MG. He went down...and his comrades got captured by the Russians. I would see them back later in Belgium at the Petit Chateau. Except for Dufour. He survived the war and he found himself a nice Russian lady who became his wife. He settled in Russia and he even became a Russian citizen! The fighting continued and we were running low on ammunition and supplies. We had to retreat while the Russian symphony of bullets continued without stopping. I sent Deprez to Wittichow to get us ammunition and food. As always, loyal as he was, he went all alone using a horse and a wagon. He left with a message for Commander Lakai: “Lt Delannoy is encircled by enemy forces, you have to initiate a counterattack!” in the meantime we arrived at a little forested area but the Russian were still advancing. Again, we got engaged in heavy fighting.

Wittichow

The Legionnaires who came out alive of this fight took a position in another trench, just before the town of Wittichow. Those brave “moles” had done an excellent job again and they definitely earned the “order of the golden shovel.” After a while, everything calmed down but we had to maintain our position until the start of the next phase. Where they going to attack again or not? They didn’t! Because they didn’t attack we were able to leave our position and move toward Wittichow. Our Sgt Deprez - an extraordinary man – was already there and he had prepared us some pancakes and coffee. He made this feast for us because we had a very long march ahead of us and he thought we could use the fuel for our bodies. On our right villages and towns were on fire due to

the progress of the Russian Army. We made ourselves ready for the “marathon” that awaited us. We left Wittichow and we marched and marched without stopping. At the end of the night, we finally arrived in Seefeld. In the first house in Seefeld, we all fell asleep in the beds and couches that were inside the house. We were not even able to take our clothes off because we were so exhausted!

Seefeld – Stettin

We were so exhausted that we wouldn't even wake up wouldn't it be for an old Rexist of Namur that came to wake us up. There were no troops left in Seefeld and a Russian tank was already shelling the exit of the town. Our morning workout would be the cadence of our marching, which became one of our specialties. On our way, we encountered numerous refugees, women, babies, and children, who were running away from the war. My Good Samaritans helped to push strollers – “The wheels need to keep rolling for victory, the strollers need to keep rolling in preparation of the next war!” My men also carried bags and other belonging for these refugees. An officer of the General Staff met with us at an intersection. He was riding a motorcycle of course. He told us to go the direction of Saarow and Lubow where the rest of the troops had regrouped in the hope to slow down the Russian advance of tanks. Since the early morning, we were marching in all directions. I think it would've been a lot better if the General Staff had posted officers and Feldgendarmerie on major intersections between Wittichow and Seefeld to give us some directions. I decided not to head towards Saarow and Lubow because we would've arrived too late. Major Joffre once said that a good officer had to disobey an order every once in a while, especially when this order was absurd or inhuman; it was some sort of courage. We then continued our way to Stettin with these women and children. In Stettin, the people didn't even realize that “Attila” was already knocking on their door.

Stettin, March 1945

After we redeployed on the front in Stettin the front had stabilized on a bridgehead on the right bank of the Oder River at Finkenwald and Altdamm. The Chief there asked for volunteers to form a Walloon Kampfgruppe to defend the bridgehead. It was Robert D, my old commander of the 31st Companie of Cherkasy, who was in command of what was left of the Battalion of the 70th Regiment. He called us in his office, one by one, to get to know the volunteers of the Kampfgruppe. He started with the officers and soon it would be my turn: “I don't even have to ask you!” he said. Apparently, I had a very good reputation as a soldier. Now the men were entering his office: “Do you want to join Lt Delannoy in the Kampfgruppe?” he asked. “With Lt Delannoy, Absolutely!” was the response from the 30 men that entered his office. Now we had enough bodies to form a platoon. Even at the bottom of the ladder, among the lower ranks, it seemed that I had a very good reputation. After a short period of reorganization four companies of volunteers crossed the bridge over the Oder River, singing marching songs that were accompanied by the orchestra of the line of fire!”



Men of the SS Sturmbrigade Wallonie in Cherkassy – source www.home.arcor.de



The story of Richard

The SS or Schutzstaffel is an umbrella term. Within the SS you had the Allgemeine SS, which was the original black-uniformed SS. Then you had the Gestapo – the secret police - which was the grey-uniformed, leather-coated types; and then there was the Waffen SS – the military wing of the SS. The Waffen SS comprised almost one million soldiers. We were a branch of the armed forces and we were not a branch of the political SS in the sense, we were highly-motivated, young, idealistic Nazis. There's no question in my mind. You had to be 1.80m or 6ft tall and you had to be physically healthy. In my documents, I had my passport of ancestry or Ahnenpass. You had to prove that you were Aryan for three generations and I had to prove because I wanted to become an officer, that I had five generations of Aryans!

It was an Aryan philosophy that was superimposed on the Waffen SS by Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler. Himmler was a nut. He was a biology teacher and he had a pseudo-scientific approach. Immediately I was transferred to a place called Monschau in Nordrhein-Westfalen – Germany - where the 1st SS Panzer Division was assembling for the Battle of the Bulge. Well, we called it Operation Christrose. The Americans called it the Battle of the Bulge and it was actually the Ardennes Offensive, which started on 16 December 1944. We were part of that operation until we ran out of ammunition and gas.

The logistics were impossible because, for the first week, we were very successful because the Americans couldn't use their air force: it was snowing, cold and misty, which was totally in our favor. And that's why we were so successful the first week. But the minute the skies cleared, we just knew that for us, this was the end of it. And we not just only lost the tanks because we had no fuel, but no logistics were allowed to come through. We had orders not to move during the daytime however you couldn't fight a war by just fighting at night. So fortunately for me, we blew up our own tank and then fought as grenadiers, as infantry soldiers. Sometime early April, I was reunited again with my division and we were the last group south of Munich that tried to delay the progress of the Americans, which we weren't really successful in. And we didn't really try very hard. I must say this, for the first time, I recognize that the commanding officers allowed people to desert, you know, or encouraged them to desert. And by the time we got to Reichenhall - Reichenhall which is near my hometown - we were down to about 400 people. You know, for a whole division, that's a very small handful. I was what they called a Kradmelder which was a messenger on a motorcycle. And on May 3 - 1945, I was shot off my motorcycle by an American armored vehicle and I passed out. The next thing I knew is that it was late at night and my buddies had carried me to a mountain cabin. However, they already had received orders from the officer in charge to leave so I asked them to leave me in the mountain cabin with the Austrians. I knew them, the Austrians, and my comrades left me with them as they went along. And these guys, the Austrians, one day all went across the mountains and went home. And that was the end of the war for me. Hitler, to most of us, did the right thing at the time. Of course, none of us read the book *Mein Kampf* and none of us really listened to all the soothsayers who didn't agree with him and I violently disagreed with my father on the issue of Hitler because he could sense what was coming because he was older. I was too young to sense that war was on the way and to me, he led us, not down the garden path, but he led us to worldwide recognition again; someone to be counted upon. We were trained up to become robots and idealistic robots. We still had some brains that were undamaged, but it was used on how we could excel in what we were going to do: fight; war; kill. They sharpened those skills in us which of course didn't sharpen the skills in terms of intellectual curiosity. History is just an interpretation. Like Winston Churchill said: "History is the propaganda of the victor."



Men of the LAH Division – source unknown



The last weeks of Kampfgruppe Wiking under SS-Hauptsturmführer Nicolußi-Leck

April 2 – 1945

SS-Hauptsturmführer Nicolußi-Leck and 150 men were sent to Germany to pick up new tanks at Paderborn. Nicolußi-Leck ('Nico' to his men) sent a scouting party ahead, SS-Obersturmführer Ola Olin and 30 men, to find a safe way to get to Paderborn. This group of 30 men encountered the lead elements of the US 5th Armoured in Harsewinkel and the first skirmishes took place. Retreating through Versmold and Melle they reached Lübbecke and commandeered 3 Holz-gas trucks and continued to Minden, which was already partially in the hands of the Brits. After unsuccessfully trying to blow the bridge across the Weser, but successfully destroying a Panzer IV, the Brits were employing using a Panzerfaust.

April 5 – 1945

They eventually continue their retreat to Bückeberg and found out from the local population that there were some armored vehicles nearby, lying unused in a Heer vehicle depot. The next morning, they managed to acquire 13 Schützenpanzerwagen (SdKfz. 250/251) including 2 SdKfz. 250/9 with 2cm cannons.

April 7 – 1945

They reached Hannover where 'Nico' reported to the city's Kampfkommandant, Generalmajor Paul Löhning. He was instructed to take up defensive positions northwest of Stöcken along Reichsstraße 6 so that he could cover both the Weser-Elbe-Kanal Bridge and the Reichsautobahn. This was where Generalmajor Löhning was expecting the US 84 Infantry Division to attack in order to take Hannover itself.

In the morning of April 8, a worker at Hanomag informed 'Nico' that there were several brand-new tanks in the factory yard of the M.N.H assembly facility at Hannover-Laatzten. The SS-Hauptsturmführer immediately assembled a few tank crews from the

men in his group and rushed to the factory to find 7 Jagdpanthers! The only problem is they were missing a few vital parts as well as fuel. He sent out a few trucks to acquire the necessary parts (optics and ammunition) and fuel from a factory in Scheuen near Celle. The men returned that afternoon and before the day's end, the Jagdpanther guns had been properly calibrated and test-fired. The 'Kampfgruppe Wiking' was ready for action. Major General Alexander Bolling, commander of the US 84th Infantry had laid out his troops (Infantry Regiments 333, 334 and 335, reinforced by elements of a tank-destroyer battalion) for a direct assault on Hannover. The 11th Cavalry Group (Colonel Fierson) covered his left flank. Bolling was relying on a captured map, which showed all of the defensive positions in and around Hannover including the strengths of the units that had been employed. He was optimistic that he had little to fear in the upcoming battle for the city. He was completely unaware of the potent armored force that was awaiting his advance. With his powerful Kampfgruppe assembled, Nicolußi-Leck not only took up his assigned positions but went further and occupied Frielingen and Ricklingen. He was now in a position to combat any attempts to take the Leine bridge at Ricklingen and to defend against attacks from Bordenau. Colonel Fierson's lead elements were taken into the crosshairs of 3 Jagdpanthers at the edge of Ricklingen. The crews of these tanks were veterans who had been hardened by years of combat on the Eastern Front, always outnumbered and without adequate supplies. This was different, sitting in their brand-new tanks and well supplied, as they were now fighting on German soil. Every shot was a hit! Despite the mounting losses Col. Fierson took up the challenge. He called in an artillery strike on the town itself and moved up his men. The Wiking tank crews soon couldn't make out anything in the dust and debris and withdrew to Horst. The Americans took Ricklingen. The cavalry had won but at a price.

The 11th Cavalry tried to continue their advance, first due east, then northeast and finally north. All their attempts to continue the advance were stopped. Col. Fierson had lost 20 armored vehicles but he also knew that Bollinger couldn't risk an attack on Hannover if the cavalry couldn't secure the flank and the bridges over the Leine. He sent a couple of companies north to Bordenau where the British had already captured the bridge. His men made the crossing at Bordenau and pressed on to Frielingen, but once again they drew the shorter straw. The lead tanks took fire from the remaining four Jagdpanthers (firing at maximum range). Although it is not known how many armored vehicles the 11th Cavalry lost in the battle, the only Jagdpanther to be destroyed was credited with six kills before it met its fate. In addition, a Schützenpanzerwagen was also lost. Col. Fierson called off his attack.

April 9 – 1945

Maj. General Bollinger had redeployed his forces. The 335th Regiment was still facing east, facing Hannover itself. The 334th had come up over Ricklingen to strike southeast and the 333rd was crossing at Bordenau to outflank the unexpected resistance that had been encountered. After bringing up the 334th Regiment Bollinger again pressed ahead and tried to take Horst. Three more Shermans were lost and Bollinger orders heavy artillery strikes on Horst and Frielingen. Kampfgruppe Wiking was forced to withdraw to Godshorn, Vinnhorst and the Weser-Elbe-Kanal. The meager forces available to defend

Hannover were no match for a reinforced US infantry division and Generalmajor Loehning knew it. He asked permission to clear the city but was ordered to fight or face a court-martial.

April 10 - 1945

During the night Bollinger started his attack on Hannover. First, he had the artillery pound known enemy gun emplacements and positions. His men began their attack before daybreak and it was perfect weather for an attack; there was a lot of fog. The fog was thick enough to cover his advancing soldiers and with minor exceptions, they made almost completely unopposed progress. The 333 Regiment was at the far left, north of Hannover heading south (having managed to find a crossing over the Weser-Elbe-Kanal), the 334 Regiment was in the center attacking from the north-west and the 335 was attacking east (frontally). Both the 333 and 334 bypassed the Kampfgruppe Wiking, unaware of its whereabouts. Only after the lead elements had passed did anyone notice a Jagdpanther at the Autobahn underpass. The second battalion bypassed the Jagdpanther and continued to the state forest. The following units surrounded the tank and captured the five-man crew. There were apparently asleep, their guard having been overwhelmed before he could sound the alarm. The US 84th Infantry Division took Hannover almost without a fight.

As the morning progressed Nico realized he could not make contact with any of the German forces in and around Hannover and ordered his men to retreat to Hannover. Traveling at the head of the column he came across the chief of the fire department who told him the Americans were already in the city but he would try to lead them through. At the edge of the city, civilians told them the Americans were already at the train station. After a few detours Nico, riding in an open vehicle, reached a square (Kröpke) and the Americans immediately ordered him and his comrades to surrender. As the following Jagdpanther came around the corner it opened fire with its machine gun and Nico was able to escape and climb aboard Olin's Jagdpanther. The column continued at high speed encountering further groups of American tanks but clearing out before anyone could get a good visual on them. After leaving Hannover Nico was determined to try to link up with German forces further east, however, he could not know that he would not succeed.

April 11 - 1945

While elements of the US 84th Infantry Division continued their advance eastward following the capture of Hannover, a German column was marching on side roads towards them, if neither side changed direction they were destined to meet in and around Langlingen. The German column was that of the SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking led by Hauptsturmführer Nicolussi-Leck, which had regrouped in Lehrte and was planning to march North and then Northeast towards Wittingen and ultimately Wittenberg on the Elbe River. The Kampfgruppe consisted of 9 Schützenpanzerwagen, 6 Jagdpanther, and one Bergepanzer at this time. Contact with the enemy was not to be avoided but sought. Just outside of Lehrte, there was a short firefight with 4 Sherman tanks; 2 were knocked out by the Jagdpanther of Untersturmführer Karl Jauß. In Abbensen the Kampfgruppe met up with tanks from the Lehrabteilung, but they did not want to join the group. Continuing on to Langlingen via Uetze they captured 2 American fuel trucks and captured approximately

50 men; Nico let them go that evening.

April 12 - 1945

The Kampfgruppe made it to the forest East of Sandlingen on the morning of April 12 with all its armored vehicles and over 100 men, including a growing number of stragglers. Immediate reconnaissance showed that the bridges across the Mühlengraben and the Aller near Langlingen were destroyed. A heavily armed Schützenpanzerwagen (equipped with a 20mm gun and commanded by an Obersturmführer) was dispatched to Wienhausen to determine if the bridges there were intact and to hold them until the Kampfgruppe arrived. The Schützenpanzerwagen's crew was primarily made up of twelve Heer or Army troops, which included a few officers and NCOs. At noon the Obersturmführer reached Wienhausen and discovered that the bridges were intact and already equipped with explosive charges. The Schützenpanzerwagen (SPW) took up position on the northern bank of the Aller River, under the bridge, on the outskirts of Oppershausen. The bridge was not big enough to completely conceal the vehicle, which was to have consequences. The crew took up their positions around the bridge at 14:00h. At the same time, the US 333 Regiment arrived in Wienhausen, en route from Bockelskamp. The American column was not visible from Oppershausen, but the noise would not have gone unnoticed. The scout cars at the head of the column slowly drove through the deserted streets of Wienhausen. When they reached the crossroad in the road leading to Oppershausen they stopped and observed that the bridges were intact and then noticed the rear of the Schützenpanzerwagen protruding from under the bridge. They immediately opened fire and the SPW was hit. The SPW crew thought that their own tanks were shooting at them; they were not expecting any American troops this far to the East. Feldwebel Ehrbeck jumped on a bicycle and wildly waving a white cloth, rode towards Wienhausen. By now Capt. Bradford's 9th Company had gone into position at the outskirts of Wienhausen. The Feldwebel having closed the distance to the Americans to 150 meters realized his mistake and jumped off the bicycle and tried to escape on foot. He was cut down by a rifleman. The rest of the German SPW crew took up the firefight with Capt. Bradford's company from across the Aller River. As this engagement was unfolding an artillery battalion arrived in Wienhausen and took up firing positions to assist Capt. Bradford if needed. Capt. Bradford still hoped to take the bridge intact and ordered his heavy machine guns to pin down the Obersturmführer and his men so that he could get a few men close enough to disarm the charges and take the bridge. But as the GIs approached, the Obersturmführer gave the order to blow the bridge, despite his orders to hold it for the rest of the SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking. Capt. Bradford continued his attack on Oppershausen and the SPW crew. The men under the command of the Obersturmführer fought off the American attacks for nine hours. They were opposed not only by the 9th Company but also the 11th and the artillery battalion. Oppershausen was virtually destroyed and at least six of the Germans were killed in the fierce fighting. The fate of the remaining five, including the Obersturmführer, remains unknown. Some may have perished in the burning houses others may have escaped or been taken captive. In the meantime, the 1st Battalion of the 333 US Regiment passed through Wienhausen bound for Offensen, the Aller bridge at Schwachhausen, and ultimately Nordburg. Now the bridges

to the Northeast and Southeast of the SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking were either destroyed or in the hands of the Americans.

April 13 – 1945

On the morning of April 13, the SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking found itself deep behind enemy lines. With the US 333rd Regiment to the north and US 334th Regiment to the south, they were outnumbered on either side 20:1. Their plan was to hold out until the first wave of US troops had cleared the area and then attempt to cross either of the intact Aller River crossings. But it was also a Friday. The 3rd Battalion of the 334th Regiment had spent the night in Langlingen, where the bridge over the Aller River was destroyed. At daybreak, they started driving along the train tracks in a westerly direction in search of a suitable crossing. After 3km they came upon the destroyed bridge across the Mühlengraben. They immediately set their engineers to the task of repairing the bridge and sent out patrols to establish a protective perimeter. The patrols quickly ran into the SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking in the forest and after a short exchange of gunfire the entire battalion set out to comb through the forested area. Nico avoided being drawn into a fight where his tanks could not be brought to bear. Besides, they were outnumbered 5:1 and there were several other US battalions nearby. Nico and his men broke out of the forest, heading Northwest across the railway tracks and towards the wooded area on the outskirts of Wienhausen. They reached it shortly before 11:00h. Meanwhile, the US artillery battalion was moving out of Wienhausen to take up new firing positions further east. Their path crossed that of the SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking. Nico had his Jagdpanthers open fire at 1,000 meters, setting 5 trucks on fire with the first volley. The artillery battalion immediately turned around and took up positions in Wienhausen again. The SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking bypassed Wienhausen to the south and headed straight for Bockelskamp. From there they fired on a US supply column and destroyed another 4 vehicles. Nonetheless, the end seemed in sight. The 3rd Battalion of the 333rd Regiment and the 3rd Battalion 334th Regiment formed a semicircle around the SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking from the south and then to the north was the Aller River. While the artillery battalion kept a firing a barrage of shells on the SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking, Nico, and his men searched the town for anyone who could point them to a ford in the river. A young woman told them she knew of a place not far up the river and the Kampfgruppe headed out. The Jagdpanthers had no problems crossing the river; the last two each towed a Schützenpanzerwagen behind them. But then the artillery fire set in again and it was pretty accurate. The remaining Schützenpanzerwagen made a dash for it but all ended up getting hopelessly mired in the riverbed. One soldier was killed and 10 wounded. The SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking regrouped and spent the night in the wooded area East of Ostersloh.

April 14 – 1945

On the morning of April 14, Nico ordered his troops to continue their march East in the hope of still linking up with their own lines. Following the loss of so much of their equipment, he ordered his men to avoid further engagements with the enemy. He did not know that the US 84th Infantry Division, whose sector he was operating in, had already reached the Elbe River. The SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking cautiously moved from one wooded

area to the next, making frequent stops to observe their surroundings for the telltale signs of enemy troops. They skirted Oppershausen to the North, something that was only made possible by the fact the 3rd Battalion, 333rd Regiment had not yet realized that the SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking had already vacated Bockelskamp. Nico and his men were headed towards a swampy area but the Schützenpanzerwagen that were scouting the way for the Kampfgruppe managed to find the only available crossing point for many kilometers, allowing them to continue their march towards the Elbe. Upon reaching the wooded area of the Halzhorn, 3 km south of Hohne, they could hear plenty of motorized traffic to the South from Müden (the armored elements of the 102nd US Infantry Division) and straight ahead to the East was the impassable bog of the Hahnenmoor. The only roads that angled to the east would surely lead the Kampfgruppe to another encounter with the Americans, so Nico decided to continue through the forest and to attempt to sneak through the open area between Hohne and Ummern to the North. Major-General Bolling had moved his headquarters from Hannover to Hohne the day before and he was not alone in Hohne, the US 771st Tank Battalion was being held in reserve in there. Given that the town was secured to the North by the Wiehe River and to the South by bogs and woods, the 20 Shermans of the 771st Battalion secured the area by guarding the only access points, which were primarily facing South, from where no attack could be expected. And yet, suddenly the sounds of tank tracks could be heard coming from the edge of the bog. Nico had sent his 2 remaining Schützenpanzerwagen along with 3 Jagdpanthers to recon while the other 3 Jagdpanthers covered their advance. The Shermans waited until their opponents were only 1,000 meters away before opening fire. Both Schützenpanzerwagen and one Jagdpanther were immediately hit and caught fire. One Jagdpanther managed to break through while the rest of the German tanks opened fire on the Shermans. Even the burning Jagdpanther of Untersturmführer Schüßler, their fourth victim, continued to return fire for a short while. Using their 8.8cm guns and 8cm thick frontal armor to their fullest advantage the remaining 3 Jagdpanthers kept up a steady barrage of shells on the 771st Battalion until they had all but suppressed the determined American defense. An attempt by Untersturmführer Jauß to recover the Jagdpanther of Untersturmführer Schüßler failed and resulted in the loss of the Bergepanzer as well. Now with a final victory in his grasp, his tanks surrounded by the wounded infantrymen, Nico ordered a withdrawal into the bog of the Hahnenmoor. The remaining Sherman tanks breathed a sigh of relief when they saw the Jagdpanthers heading South. One Jagdpanther was lost a short distance into the bog to transmission failure. But the men of the SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking had not yet given up. After handing off their wounded to a local shepherd, they formed a raiding party to scare up needed fuel for their Jagdpanthers. During the night they captured 2 American trucks and a Jeep. After driving a short distance into the bog they let their captives go. When the raiding party reached the rest of the Kampfgruppe they checked the contents of the trucks. To their great disappointment, the trucks were carrying flower and sugar, not the fuel they so desperately needed. Nico and the last men of his Kampfgruppe, now down to about 30 strong, knew that they would not make it back to their own lines.

Nico made his final command decision on the morning of April 16. He turned to Obersturmführer Olin and said: *“We have flower and need bread. I will look for a baker.”* Olin knew what Nicolussi-Leck meant to do and shook his hand one last time. Nicolussi-

Leck and his adjutant walked back the way they had come and surrendered to the Americans in Hohne. Command now fell to Obersturmführer Olin who ordered the 2 captured trucks driven onto the nearby rail tracks and set alight. The remaining 2 Jagdpanthers were driven a short distance into the bog where they would sink from their own weight, the remaining ammunition, only 10 rounds were left, was buried elsewhere. Four men carrying machine pistols and Panzerfausts occupied the only remaining vehicle, the captured Jeep. Their plan was to try and reach southern Germany. Their adventurous journey was ultimately successful. The rest of the men made their way on foot. The Jagdpanther that had broken through at Hohne two days earlier was knocked out between the towns of Süderwittingen and Ohrdorf, 5 kilometers South of Wittingen. Four of its crew perished on April 16 and the remaining crewmember, Georg Perchtold, ultimately met his fate on the 20th. When by Hauptsturmführer Nico surrendered in Hohne and told his interrogators who he was and that it was his Kampfgruppe that had been a thorn in Major-General Bolling's side, they did not want to believe him. They had expected to have been opposed by a tank regiment, or at least by a battalion, not by a simple SS-Captain. The SS-Kampfgruppe Wiking covered a total distance of 250 km before ceasing to exist.



The story of a Dutch volunteer

Close to the North Sea in the area of IJmuiden, in the vicinity of the canal dike lies the “Scattered Houses”. There, somewhere in the line with the schoutenstraat, Evertsenstraat and market square, just across from the Lange Nieuwstraat, lies the “Rivierenbuurt.” There in the 1930s, at number 44 “De Kikvorsch”, lived Arnd and Julia. In the dunes played their 5 children. The two elders, Jos and Wim, would die a few years later at the Eastern front during the Russian winter offensive of 1944.

Arnd served, between 1915 and 1918, with the 3rd regiment Hussars and was since 1924 Police Constable in Velsen. He wanted to become a Police Brigadier (sergeant) but he failed the exam five times. His supervisor, the "District Commissioner of the Rijksveldwacht" made a hard assessment of Arnd's abilities to become a Brigadier and stated that it was because of his poor qualifications and low intellect - this is how it was actually stated in his assessment. This assessment of Arnd's incapability to become Brigadier made him very angry with the District Commissioner. However, the German occupation of the Netherlands meant a promotion opportunity for Arnd. On October 5 - 1940 he reports himself as a member at the NSB headquarters. He is convinced that his promotion is stopped by his senior and he writes an accusatory letter about the District Commissioner to Seyss-Inquart on September 24 - 1941. The letter was successful in its mission and on July 1 - 1942 he is, by official order of the Germans and by the newly appointed NSB-Mayor of Velsen, A.G. Groeneveldt, promoted to brigadier. Arnd is a National-Socialist in heart and soul, and he brings a part of his political views and believes over on his young children. On February 14 - 1941 Anton Mussert calls the male population of the Netherlands to join the Waffen-SS. Wim, the second son in the family, is too young, but on March 6 - 1941 he reports as a member of the *Jeugdstorm*, an organization similar to the Hitlerjugend. He is 16 years old and his father must sign the request.

When the Germans invaded Russia in June of that same year, Wim belonged to one of the first men to voluntarily join the Waffen SS in the Netherlands. Is it because of the adventure, or because of the influence of his father, or is it because of the promises of the NSB? "*With a two-year contract you'll get a nice and well-paid position with the local police force and with a four-year contract you'll get a "nice" big farm.*" A nice perspective that can be obtained by fighting against this "pest" called Bolshevism which forms "*a threat against your religion, your marriage, and your family*", states the NSB pamphlet. Whatever happened, Wim landed from the training center straight into the "3rd Freiwilligen Standarte Northwest." After his training, he's sent to the Eastern front and is for several months engaged in the battle of Leningrad. He makes promotion and he receives the "Ost Medaille", a medal called "Gefrierfleischorden" or frozen meat medal by the soldiers. In the fall of 1942, Wim was injured and received medical attention in a field hospital in Kurland. From Kurland, he wrote a letter to his 10-year-old niece Mieke. In the letter, he calls her "Mies" like he used to do when he was home.

"Mitau, 13 December 1942

My dearest Mies,

How are you? I'm doing great. I find it moving that you, my little niece, never have forgotten about me. You wrote that you were in Thüringen with Bart. I'm sure it was very nice over there. I'm doing well here as there are a lot of nice nurses who take good care of your nephew, so don't be worried about me. How are you doing at school? I presume you already have vacation now? Say, Mies, Santa Claus has already been here in the field hospital. We all got something from him: cookies, chocolate, licorice, and some cigarettes. You know that I

don't smoke so I gave them away. With Christmas, we'll have a great feast here. I'll write to you more about it next time. Merry Christmas and a happy New Year.

Bye Mies, bye!!!

Wim”

The letter about the Christmas holidays never arrives and in 1943 Wim comes home on leave. He visited his family in his SS uniform. The kids in the family looked up at him and were very sad when he had to leave again. When Wim left, he would never come home again. Wim left for Yugoslavia to fight Tito's partisans however just before Christmas 1943 he is transferred to the Leningrad region. The trip to Leningrad is long and cold with temperatures of – 40 degrees Celsius. The skis that the Germans received were all burnt in the field ovens, to keep the soldiers warm. On January 14 – 1944 the Russian winter offensive starts pushing back the Germans. In the middle of an offensive, on January 16, there's one happy moment for Wim. He received a Christmas package from his sister, which she had sent to Yugoslavia in November. He was so happy to receive the package that day that he sang the song all day long. On January 19 he writes a letter home, saying how happy he was with the package. Then everything became quiet. On February 2 – 1944 he was killed in action on the Eastern front. In a letter that his parents received, it stated that he was killed in action due to a “Kopfschuss” or headshot. Usually, they wrote this to accommodate the family that the death was instant and painless, and to cover the more gruesome reality. His niece Mies was very sad to hear the news about Wim's passing. She always looked up to him and for her, he was a hero and a good-looking boy.

However, in the Netherlands, there were different reactions to the deaths of Dutch Waffen SS soldiers. The monthly magazine WA (Weerbaarheidsafdeling) of the NSB put the following letter in their magazine, a letter that was received by the parents of a killed Waffen SS soldier: *“We congratulate you with the death of your fascist son. It is fantastic that this traitor is dead. Actually, he had to stay alive so that after the war we could hang him on a pole!”*

After the war, Wim's parents were arrested. “Yes, I had a son named Wilhelmus who in June 1941 voluntarily joined the Finnish Army. After the outbreak of WWII my son joined the German Armed Forces, to be more precise the Waffen SS Standarte Northwest. Arnd was released from prison years later. His son Wim would've been 95 years old now. His mother always said that he was such a sweet boy...



Feldpost

During the war, the only communication with the soldier and his family was by written or typed letters. There wasn't always a guarantee that the mail would arrive at its destination. Maybe an aerial attack destroyed the mail convoy or it would get lost at the front before it actually reached the postmaster. But if the mail would arrive at the front or at home then there was always a sigh of relief. It was probably the most important thing to know that your loved one was still alive because when one's far away from home you only have the memories of that person. The following letter was written on October 25 – 1943 by E.Hirzmann of the *Bauleitung der Waffen SS und Polizei – Graz-Wetzeldorf* to her brother *Soldat* Josef Hirzmann with the *11/15 Kompanie Gebirgsjäger Regiment (FP10274)*. This letter is from my personal collection and it depicts the tragedy of war. It's a letter from a sister to her brother who was fighting at the front...

“Dearest brother,

Now a week has passed that I was at home and also have written to you. How are you? You haven't written us for a long time and we wait with longing for mail from you, and we also often wonder at home whether, at home, something has arrived from you, but alas. I'm curious if you received those 2 pieces 1 Kg packages and a number of 10 dkg wrappers (I believe about 11 pieces). I hope so because there were some good things in there, especially the pastry that you like so much. Please write me back for once and, if possible, a detailed letter where you are and how you're doing.

As far as I'm concerned, I'm doing well, I'm pretty busy at work – it never stops – and at home, I always find something to do. But I say to myself, work is always something nice because it gives you a little bit of distraction and you don't have to think about the bad times like these. Last Sunday I was back here in Graz. The entire day, actually in the afternoon, I had lots of things to do like doing the laundry, cleaning the house, and baking pastries for you. One of these days I will send you 10 dkg packages. On Sunday Margrit was here and she sends you her cordial greetings. At noon there was an air raid alarm, but without a dropping, with us, it's never bad until now we are still spared. This afternoon Peter came to me and we cut some wood until 4 o'clock; he chopped the wood and I cleaned it up. I had to stay away from the office for a few hours so I'm staying a little bit later tonight. I'm not going out anymore, I'm not going to the cinema or to the theater; one day goes by quicker than the other.

My biggest concern is you; I hope you're doing well and that you're healthy, everything else doesn't really matter. The whole harvest at home is already done, I've helped out a

lot, and uncle was here this week and we have all the work done; another good job is done.

Leo is somewhere in Italy where he's engaged with the Tiger tanks; he writes me regularly. Koblischek Tonschi also wrote to me in the last couple of days and he asks about you how you're doing. He sends his best regards. He had to go through a lot and he had to go through some retreats (at the front), however, things are going better now for him and he's able to rest a little bit. Mutz is pregnant and Tonschi already has the "daddy" fever. Otherwise, there's nothing new to tell you. Did you write to Kurt lately? Please let us know how you're doing. Warm greetings and big kisses to you from your sister."

This letter was sent to the front but, unfortunately, it was returned to sender. On the envelope there was a green stamp mentioning the following: "*Zurueck Empfaenger Gefallen Fuer GrossDeutschland*" – translated: Returned, receiver fell (KIA) for greater Germany.

The following letter is from SS Rottenführer Hans Auer (Feldpost 25081.A) - who was most likely attached to 6 SS Mountain Division *Nord* (SS Kampfgruppe Nord) - to his nephew Soldat Alois Schweiger from the Wander-FLAK-Transport Battr. A.(mot) 2/VI. The letter is dated 15 November 1941. Again, a soldier writes to a family member in the hope to hear something back. This letter is from my personal collection.

"Dear nephew,

It's been a little while since you wrote to me so I'm writing you a letter instead. I can tell you that I'm in good health, which is the most important of all. I also wrote you a letter a while ago but I never received a reply from your part. I also wrote to your wife but I haven't heard back from her either. We haven't been at our usual pace here and we've been gone from Norway for $\frac{3}{4}$ of a year now; currently, we're at the Northern Karelian front and I've been true a lot here. I'm not in the kitchen anymore but I'm with the truck drivers now. I took the exam and for two months they tested me. Now I'm driving an American Ford 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ ton through Finland. There are no real dangers here except for the cold. The temperature went down to -35 degrees which is not pleasant at all. I won't be able to come home for Christmas because we can't leave the front.

Best wishes from "Onkel" Hans and please let me know that you are ok."

Training of the Waffen SS

Training of Waffen SS members was not more different than any other military units during that time. The only difference was that there was that political component that was part of the basic training of the Waffen SS. The following gives a summary of the training program for members of the Waffen SS.

General.

Propaganda on behalf of the SS, political education, physical training, pre-military and technical training, as well as training within the SS, was the responsibility of the SS Central Department. However, the responsibility for the military training of Waffen SS units fell completely under the SS Main Operational Department.

Before the war the SS aspirant in his first year of service trained for the SA Defense Training Badge (SA-Wehrabzeichen) and the Reich Sports Badge in bronze (bronzenes Reichssportabzeichen). He was then called up first for six months of service in the Reich Labor Service, and then for his term of duty in the German Army. After two and a half years, he returned to the SS to receive further intensive training and indoctrination. Finally, on the ninth of November following his return to civil life, he was inducted into the SS as a full SS man. The outbreak of the war and the creation of the Waffen SS interrupted this training schedule.

Propaganda and political education.

The Office for Political Education (Amt Weltanschauliche Erziehung - Amt T) in the Education and Physical Training Group (Amtsgruppe C - Ag C) was responsible for propaganda and the political education of German personnel. This was carried out mainly in two ways. In the first place this office supervised the issuance of a number of propaganda publications, such as the Waffen SS recruiting handbook "*Dich ruft die Waffen SS*", the series of SS educational booklets (SS-Schulungshefte), a news magazine for SS and Police (SS-Informationsdienst), and an illustrated magazine with stories and articles for more general consumption (SS-Teitheft). Secondly, this office held political education courses for SS officers and enlisted personnel in SS training camps (SS-Ausbildungslager) and in addition was responsible for the appointment of education officers (Schulungsoffiziere) to the different staffs of the SS training schools. Political and propaganda directives for the Waffen SS also emanated from this office.

The foreign recruits often required special indoctrination before they could be handed over to the Waffen SS as fit for its military training. To meet this need special

training camps (Ausbildungslager) were established. Such camps and the whole political education of foreign volunteers were under the control and supervision of the Office for Germanic Training (Germanische Erziehung - Amt III) in the Germanic SS group. This office issued a number of propaganda publications for foreign volunteers, including a magazine for each nationality in its own language and also a number of newspapers.

Physical and preliminary training.

The Office for Physical Training (Amt für Leibeserziehung — Amt IT) in the Education and Physical Training Group was charged with the responsibility for physical training of all branches of the SS. The SS instructors in athletics and physical culture were trained at the SS Central School for Physical Training (SS-Reichsschule für Leibesübungen), and special SS manuals on the subject were issued. In addition, the Office for Physical Training set up special physical training camps for the Germanic SS outside the Reich. The SS had for some time taken a very active interest in the pre-military training programs of the Hitler Youth and other Party organizations.

Technical training.

As part of the general program of training and preparation for the Waffen SS, special SS Higher Vocational Schools (SS-Berufsoberschulen) had been set up under the control and direction of the Education and Physical Training Group for giving higher technical training to candidates of the Waffen SS. All German boys who were apprentices or students in business, trade, or agriculture, and were attending a trade or technical school could apply for entry into such a school as officer applicants of the Waffen SS. The wartime course was limited to 1 1/2 years and was free to the selected candidates. The Vocational Schools of the Waffen SS (Berufsschulen der Waffen SS) gave similar training, though of a lower standard.

Military training.

The military training of the Waffen SS was controlled entirely by the SS Main Operational Department, which exercised this function through three main agencies:

The Training Branch (Abt I d) in the Headquarters Office of the Waffen SS (Kommandoamt der Waffen SS - Amt IT) supervises and coordinates the whole sphere of training in the Waffen-SS. This branch was divided into a number of sections, each of which was responsible for a certain type of training. Its mission included close cooperation with all other offices and inspectorates concerned with military training, liaison with the training agencies of the German Army, and issuance and control of all instructional material. It also registered and controlled the training of future SS staff officers, providing courses for supply officers (7 b - Tehrgänge) and for intelligence officers (7 c - Tehrgänge).

The SS inspectorates (SS-Inspektionen), which were combined into an inspectorate group (Amtsgruppe C - Ag C), were responsible for the technical and unit training within the various branches of service. There were ten such inspectorates, numbered in a broken series from one to 13. Each one was led by an Inspector

(Inspekteur), who was directly responsible to the Chief of the SS Main Operational Department. It controlled experimental and demonstration units and staffs, and it usually worked in close liaison with the corresponding inspectorate in the OKH – Oberkommando des Heeres.

The Training Group (Amtsgruppe B - Ag B) was responsible for individual officer and non-commissioned officer training. It exercised these functions through the Office for Officer Training (Amt Führerausbildung - Amt XI), which controlled all officer candidate schools (SS-Junkerschulen) and courses, and the office for non-commissioned officer training (Amt Unter-führerausbildung), which controlled all non-commissioned officer schools and courses.

Schools and courses.

During 1943 and 1944 the Waffen SS established schools and courses for almost all branches of military affairs needed by a complete and well-balanced military organization. As a result, it was now thoroughly equipped with schooling facilities of its own, although certain highly specialized types of personnel were still trained in special SS courses at regular Army schools. The SS schools may be divided into four categories: special service schools, officer candidate schools, non-commissioned officer schools, and specialist training establishments.

Almost all the schools of the Waffen SS had certain basic elements of organization in common, which were analogous to those of Army schools. They were led by a commander who was assisted by a headquarters staff (Kommandostab). Under this, they had instruction groups (Lehrgruppen) of battalion status and inspectorates (Inspektionen) of company status.

Special-service schools (Waffenschulen) had the function of providing specialized and advanced training for officers and enlisted personnel in their particular branch of service (Waffengattung). The Waffen SS had special-service schools for mountain infantry, cavalry, Panzer Grenadiers, and Panzer troops, but not for ordinary infantry; this is explained by the fact that all Waffen SS field divisions, except some of those which were composed principally of non-German personnel, were either Panzer, Panzer Grenadier, cavalry, or mountain divisions.

The courses at the special-service schools may be divided into three main categories: reserve officer candidate courses (Reserve-Junker-Lehrgänge — RJL); preparatory courses (Vorbereitungs-Lehrgänge) for officer applicants (Führer-Bewerber — FB) and reserve officer applicants (Reserve-Führer-Bewerber — RFB); and courses for technicians, which were found mainly at the special-service schools of the signal troops and artillery and which used special technical equipment. Most of the Waffen SS special-service schools had demonstration regiments (Lehrregimenter) attached to them

for demonstrating and instructing and also for experimenting with new weapons and tactics.

Officer candidate schools

The two basic types of establishments for the training of non-commissioned officers for the Waffen SS were the non-commissioned officer schools and separate non-commissioned officer courses. The former was for professional non-commissioned officers and the latter for reserve non-commissioned officers. The SS non-commissioned officer schools (SS-Unterführer-Schulen), which trained German and “Germanic” personnel, and the SS and foreign personnel non-commissioned officer schools (SS- und Waffen-Unterführer-Schulen), which trained German and “non-Germanic” personnel, were organized into either one or two battalions, a battalion consisting of a headquarters and four companies. Each company usually trained non-commissioned officers for a different branch of service. On completing the course an SS non-commissioned officer applicant (SS-Unterführer-Bewerber) was appointed SS non-commissioned officer candidate (SS-Unterführer-Anwärter); he could become a sergeant (SS-Unterscharführer) only after he had demonstrated his abilities in a troop unit.

Besides the courses for professional non-commissioned officers held at the non-commissioned officer schools, the Waffen SS conducted short-term non-commissioned officer courses (Unterführer-Lehrgänge) for reserve non-commissioned officers. These were usually held in the field divisions during quiet periods. Specialist training establishments had the mission of training officer technicians (Technische Führer der Sonderlaufbahnen) and particularly non-commissioned officer technicians (Unterführer der Sonderlaufbahnen). Specialist training establishments included the Motor Technical School of the Waffen SS (Kraftfahrtechnische Lehranstalt der Waffen SS) at Vienna, the Ordnance Technical School of the Waffen SS (Waffentechnische Lehranstalt der Waffen SS) at Dachau, riding and driving schools, motor transport supply-troop schools, and a number of other types.

Replacement.

Unlike the Army, the Waffen SS did not decentralize the control of its replacement system to its regional headquarters in Germany. The entire replacement system of the Waffen SS was administered centrally by the SS Main Operational Department. Replacement requisitions from field units for ordinary personnel were sent through this department directly to the replacement specific units. Those for officers went to the SS Main Department for Personnel (SS-Personnel Hauptamt), except that for all officers in the economic-administrative service, the SS Main Economic Administrative Department (SS-Wirtschaft-Verwaltungs-Hauptamt) was the responsible replacement agency. The entire system of transferring and assigning Waffen SS personnel to train and replacement units, field units, schools, and headquarters was controlled by the reinforcement branch (Abt I e) in the Headquarters Office of the Waffen SS (Kommandoamt der Waffen SS - Amt IT). This branch worked in close cooperation with various other agencies regarding the transfer and assignment of specialist personnel. For example, the veterinary troops of the Waffen SS were supervised by the Veterinary Branch (Abt IV) in the Riding and

Driving Office (Amt Reit- und - Fahrwesen - Amt VI), which also conducted their training and courses, while all ordnance troops were controlled by the Ordnance Branch (Abt II) in the office for supply (Nachschubamt - Amt VII). Both these branches maintained personnel assignment sections for their respective specialist personnel. Medical personnel were under the control of the Administration Office (Amt XIII) in the Medical Group (Sanitätswesen der Waffen SS -Amtsgruppe D - Ag D).

Officer Corps of the Waffen SS

General.

The SS Main Department for Personnel (SS-Personal-Hauptamt - SS-Pers HA) kept a central card file on all officers of the SS. The original officer corps of the SS comprised a number of different categories, mainly dependent upon the nature of their employment. The creation of the Waffen SS and its employment as a powerful military force necessitated the formation of a separate officer corps for the Waffen SS.

Selection of prospective officers.

The selection, registration, and training of prospective officers for the Waffen SS was the responsibility of the SS Main Operational Department, which exercised this function through the Office for Officer Training (Amt Führerausbildung - Amt XI) in the Training Group (Amtsgruppe B). At the time of induction, the recruiting center reported officer material to this office. Every volunteer had the opportunity to enter the officer career of the Waffen SS, depending upon three qualifications, namely, his character as a German, his performance as a National Socialist and a member of the SS, and his qualifications as a soldier and leader. Men selected as prospective officer candidates proceeded to a training and replacement unit or training camp of the Waffen SS. The unit commander decided whether a candidate was fit or unfit for the officer career of the Waffen SS after he had completed his basic training. The branch of service to which an approved candidate was to be allotted to was then determined by the Office for Officer Training in consultation with the various offices and inspectorates of the SS Main Operational Department. The officer corps of the Waffen SS comprised three categories:

(a) Active officers of the Waffen SS (Aktive Führer der Waffen SS), those who adopted the career of SS officer. The elite of this category included all pre-war graduates of the SS officer candidate schools.

(b) Reserve officers of the Waffen SS (Reserve-Führer der Waffen SS).

(c) Foreign officers of the SS (Waffen-Führer der SS). This category included all active and reserve officers of “non-Germanic” nationalities. Those eligible included men who previously held a commission in their own armies and those who showed leadership qualifications in the ranks of the Waffen SS. This category, however, did not include officers coming from “Germanic” countries, who could become full-fledged officers (SS-Führer) of either the active or reserve category.



SS-Junkerschule Bad Tölz – Source Bundesarchiv

Officer candidate schools.

Waffen SS schools designed to train and provide officer material were of two basic types: SS officer candidate schools (SS-Junkerschulen), which trained German and “Germanic” officers; and SS and foreign personnel officer candidate schools (SS-und Waffen- Junkerschulen), which trained both German personnel and “non-Germanic” foreigners. The courses lasted about 6 months and were differentiated as either war-officer-candidate courses (Kriegsjunker-Lehrgänge) or war-officer-candidate courses for foreign personnel (Kriegs-Waffenjunker-Lehrgänge).

Active officers.

The active officer candidates of the Waffen SS attend the war-officer-candidate courses (Kriegsjunker-Lehrgänge) held at the officer candidate schools. These candidates must have previously completed a preparatory course (Vorbereitungs-Lehrgang) held either at a special-service school or at a training and replacement unit of the Waffen SS. They started this course as active officer applicants (Führer-Bewerber - FB) and subsequently received the title of SS-Junker and the equivalent rank of the lowest grade of sergeant (Unterscharführer). After the mid-term examinations at the officer candidate school they became Standartenjunker with the equivalent rank of Scharführer, and after the final examination Standartenoberjunker (equivalent to Hauptscharführer). Candidates then returned to their units and, after a minimum of two months, were appointed 2nd Lieutenant (Untersturmführer) by the RF-SS upon the recommendation of their regimental commanders.

Reserve officers.

Reserve officer candidates of the Waffen SS, after taking a preparatory course as Reserve-Führer-Bewerber - RFB, became SS-Junker der Reserve and then attended a reserve officer candidate course (Reserve-Junker- Lehrgang), held at a special-service school of the Waffen SS for about 4 months. After the mid-term examinations they became Standartenjunker der Reserve and after the final examinations Standartenoberjunker der Reserve.

Foreign officers of the reserve (Waffen-Führer der Reserve) also attended the reserve officer candidate courses. Like active officer candidates, the graduates became

officers only after at least 2 months of service with a unit.

Foreign officers of the SS.

“Non-Germanic” officer candidates attended a war officer candidate course for foreign personnel (Kriegs-Waffenjunker-Lehrgang) held at the SS and foreign personnel officer-candidate schools (SS-und Waffenjunker-Schulen). After completion of the course they returned to their units and after a period of 2 months, they were appointed Waffen-Untersturmführer by the RF-SS upon the recommendation of their regimental commander.

Officer candidate courses.

Apart from the regular courses at the officer- candidate schools described above, the Waffen SS conducted the following special officer-candidate courses:

- a) Courses for partly disabled SS officer candidates (Lehrgänge für versehrte SS-Junker) held at the officer-candidate schools.
- b) Special course for Panzer officer candidates (Panzer- Junker-Sonderlehrgang).

Other officer training establishments.

The Waffen SS maintained medical and economic administrative officer training establishments with the function of providing for and supervising the military education of prospective active medical and economic administrative officers of the Waffen SS during the period of their studies at universities and other institutions.



Candidates for the Waffen SS, Ostland – Source unknown

Endnote

From the beginning, the Waffen SS formations were different compared to their Wehrmacht brethren. The Waffen SS formations were formed as elite organizations whose members saw themselves as more physically fit, motivated, and in general, better than their army counterparts. SS Grenadier Friedrich-Karl Wacker remembers this feeling of superiority,

“Our confidence was overwhelming. We had an arrogant pride in our selves, an immense esprit de corps. I always felt better than any Wehrmacht soldier. I wasn’t, of course, but I felt that I was.”(1)

For many of the volunteers joining the Waffen SS, just being selected justified their elite status. Sometimes only from the 500 selected men, only 28 made it through the selection process. Every young man who was accepted into the Waffen SS, according to Heinze Kohne, a grenadier with the SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, was very proud of this achievement.

“In my muster group were some 500 young men who were prepared to volunteer for this elite force, but only 28 were of suitable caliber. Merely being accepted was already a great honor, because the selection procedure was so rigorous.”
(2)

The elite esprit de corps so commonly found in the Waffen SS compared to other Wehrmacht units was as much a product of leadership as a selection. The relationship between officers and enlisted men in the Waffen SS differed greatly from the class separation found within the German Army.

In the Wehrmacht, less than two percent of the officers were of “peasant stock”, whereas 90% of the Waffen SS commanders had been brought up on the land. Waffen SS officers deliberately fostered a close relationship between themselves and their men. Expected to rise from the ranks, Waffen SS officers earned the respect and loyalty of their men by leading from the front and never asking them to do anything that they would not do themselves. For many, this bond between brothers in arms was the most memorable aspect of serving as part of the Waffen SS. SS Veteran Gerd Rommel explains the *esprit de corps* that he had experienced:

“My most enduring memory of the Waffen SS was the spirit with which we were all filled. We were all just around 18 years old, and our officers just 20 to 30 years old. Our Divisional commander, SS-Brigadeführer Heinz Harmel was then just 38 years old. The troops never addressed him as “Herr General”, just as “Brigadeführer.” It was this spirit of equality which made us all feel so proud.”
(3&4)

It wasn’t until the early months of 1945 that the Waffen SS formations would finally cease to exist as combat formations. The last battles of the elite Waffen SS divisions occurred not only in the Fatherland but also on the plains of Hungary. The final

offensives on the Eastern Front conducted by the Waffen SS divisions occurred during operations to relieve the siege of Budapest and protect the Reich's last fuel reserves, the Hungarian oil fields. The reconstituted "elite" Waffen SS divisions, consisting primarily of draftees combined with untrained and inexperienced former Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine personnel, were completely destroyed and ceased to exist as effective combat formations. The last Waffen SS units to fight in the Reich fought a hard battle against the Russians during the Battle of Berlin. Besides the Wehrmacht, the Volkssturm, and the Hitlerjugend, there was also the Waffen SS to protect the *Reichshauptstadt* or capital of the Reich. Their mission was to protect the Reich Chancellery and the *Führerbunker*. Ironically most of the Waffen SS troops in Berlin were foreigners. Some of them fought until the bitter end while others tried to escape to the west in the hope to surrender to the Americans and, obviously, to avoid capture by the Soviets. Some of the survivors, unfortunately, got captured by the Soviets. A description of the Totenkopf division's performance provides a brief conclusion for those individuals serving in the Waffen SS on the Eastern Front:

"The SS man's ability to remain calm in the face of disaster, his willingness to fight on against impossible odds, his lust for killing Russians, and most important, his readiness to perish rather than retreat and appear weaker than his racial enemy were all qualities that proved crucial throughout the war in retrieving hopeless situations; they became hallmarks of the Totenkopf Division's performance wherever it fought." (5)

The war in the East was very different from that in the West. The Soviet soldiers displayed comparable suicidal aggressiveness, fanatical defense and courage as the soldiers of the Waffen SS. Against this enemy, the Waffen SS formations earned their legendary reputation. Through it all, the Waffen SS divisions maintained an extremely high level of *esprit de corps*, morale, and a deep trust in their officers. This combined with the most advanced weapons of warfare available made the Waffen SS formations formidable foes.

After the war, when Hitler's atrocities became known, many Germans realized they had been misled. Who can say what the soldiers would have thought once the truth came out? Many German veterans of WWII were clueless what was going on behind the front lines, let alone back home. Yes, being with the Waffen SS one had to be stout in his beliefs and convictions, but one has to admire the courage and strength soldiers like these displayed. Nowadays we can admire the *élan* and soldiering of these men without agreeing with the National-Socialist doctrine. However, it would be really short-sighted to hold every person who once wore the "Feldgrau" uniform responsible for all the crimes committed during the war. The majority of the Waffen SS soldiers only fought as soldiers and never committed any crimes.

All the Waffen SS veterans are now in their late 80's and early 90's. It's a generation that is slowly disappearing. Some people suggest that it's because of these veteran's advanced age that they start to talk about their role in this organization as some sort of confession. This is absolutely not true! They were simply never allowed to tell their part of the story. If you know one of these veterans go and talk to them. You'll be amazed

at how happy they are to tell you their stories from the war. The stories written down in this book are just a few from the many, many more European heroes, most of whom who would not have their deeds recorded at all but would instead find a final resting place in an unmarked grave somewhere in foreign soil. It is as good as impossible to do justice to them in this book, but we can, hopefully, lift part of the veil that has hidden their exploits for such a long time.

The 38 Divisions of the Waffen SS

The following is a list of all the Waffen SS Divisions from the period 1939-1945. It must be known that some divisions actually never reached the strength of a Division.

- 1.SS-Panzer-Division - "Leibstandarte-SS Adolf Hitler"
- 2.SS-Panzer-Division - "Das Reich"
- 3.SS-Panzer-Division - "Totenkopf"
- 4.SS-Polizei-Panzergranadier-Division - "SS-Polizei-Division"
- 5.SS-Panzer-Division - "Wiking"
- 6.SS-Gebirgsjäger-Division - "Nord"
- 7.SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgsjäger-Division - "Prinz Eugen"
- 8.SS-Kavallerie-Division - "Florian Geyer"
- 9.SS-Panzer-Division - "Hohenstaufen"
- 10.SS-Panzer-Division - "Frundsberg"
- 11.SS-Freiwilligen-Panzergranadier-Division - "Nordland"
- 12.SS-Panzer-Division - "Hitlerjugend"
- 13.Waffen-Gebirgsjäger-Division der SS (kroatische Nr.1) - "Handschar"

14. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (galizische / ukrainische Nr.1) - "Galizien"
15. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (lettische Nr.1) - "Lettland"
16. SS-Panzergrenadier-Division - "Reichsführer-SS"
17. SS-Panzergrenadier-Division - "Götz von Berlichingen"
18. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier-Division "Horst Wessel"
19. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (lettische Nr.2) - "Latvia"
20. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (estnische Nr.1) - "Estland"
21. Waffen-Gebirgsjäger-Division der SS (albanische Nr.1) - "Skanderbeg"
22. SS-Freiwilligen-Kavallerie-Division - "Maria Theresa" (ungarische)
23. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier-Division (niederländische Nr.1) - "Nederland"
23. Waffen-Gebirgsjäger-Division der SS (kroatische Nr.2) - "Kama"
24. Waffen-Gebirgsjäger-Division der SS - "Karstjäger"
25. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (ungarische Nr.1) - "Hunyadi"
26. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (ungarische Nr.2) - "Hungaria"
27. SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division (flämische Nr.1) - "Langemarck"
28. SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division - "Wallonien"
29. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (italienische Nr.1) - "Italien"
29. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (rußische Nr.1) (also "R.O.N.A.")
30. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (rußische Nr.2)
30. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (weißruthenische Nr.1) - "Weißruthenien"
31. SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division - "Batschka"
32. SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division - "30 Januar"
33. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (französische Nr.1) - "Charlemagne"
33. Waffen-Kavallerie-Division der SS (ungarische Nr.3)
34. SS-Freiwilligen-Grenadier-Division - "Landstorm Nederland" (niederländische Nr.2)
35. SS-Polizei-Grenadier-Division - "SS-Polizei-Division II"
36. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS - "Dirlewanger"
37. SS-Freiwilligen-Kavallerie-Division - "Lützow"
38. SS-Grenadier-Division - "Nibelungen"

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Preface

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Stories from the front

- (1)Source: Ray Matter, Manfred Matter, Kathe Matter – info given to the author by Ray Matter to use for this book
- (2)Source: Story by Steve Klesitz as told to Chace Anderson – *Memoir Center – Tuolumne Veterans History Project*. Herr Klesitz gave his kind permission as well to use the article and gave his personal information to the author to discuss his time with the Waffen SS.
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Waffen SS training

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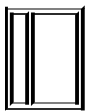
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The majority of pictures used in this book are from the Bundesarchiv in Germany. The Bundesarchiv is the number one source to find WWII pictures of all the components of the German Armed Forces from that era.

Cover picture: picture of an NCO of Germania. Cover created by Nelz Nelson.

All stories written in this book are from WWII Waffen SS veterans. Most of the names of the veterans have been replaced by a fictional name to protect the veterans and their families. Some of the stories were given to me with the request never to disclose the personal information of the veteran. Let it be clear that the real names of all these veterans will never be disclosed and that all email requests asking for disclosure will be deleted

immediately. This is my loyalty as a writer towards these men and their families who trusted me with their personal stories of that era.

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