

Experiences of War

# The Third Reich

JAMES LUCAS

Das Vermächtnis von Stalingrad:  
Kampf und Arbeit bis zum Sieg!  
Die Abwehrschlacht im Osten geht weiter  
28 Briten bei Einflügen abgeschossen  
Die Stimme der Helden

Deutschland

Wiking



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Third Reich**

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ARMS AND  
ARMOUR

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# Acknowledgements

It is with thanks that I acknowledge the help received in the production of this book.

My principal thanks must go to the men and women whose names are listed on page 189 and whose personal experiences form so much of the narrative. In many cases the stories they told awoke sad memories for them and recalled times of privation and suffering. I have listed those contributors alphabetically but have not given their ranks and titles, for these, together with the units in which they served, are given in the text.

The second group to whom my thanks are due are the several institutions and publishers, both in Germany and in this country, whose help was invaluable and who have given permission to quote from documents and published books. In this respect I wish to thank, particularly, the Munin Verlag, the Kriegsgräberfürsorge as well as the archives of the Fallschirmjäger organization, the Bundesarchiv in Freiburg and that of the Gebirgsjäger organization. In the United Kingdom the Departments of Documents and Printed Books of the Imperial War Museum as well as the Maritime Museum in Greenwich were, as usual, of special help.

The third group are those individuals who helped in the research as well as in the production of the book. These are Claire and Victoria Shaw, Rod Dymott, David Gibbons, Tony Evans and Chris Westhorp. It is, however, to my dear wife Traude, that my warmest thanks go for her constant support and unfailing encouragement.

James Lucas, 1990



# Preface

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On Friday, 1 September 1939 the Germans invaded Poland and the fighting spread to become, first a European conflict and eventually a world-wide struggle. In Europe the Second World War came to an end on 9 May 1945.

It was a conflict which opened with armies using weapons of types that would have been familiar to soldiers of the Great War. It ended, in Europe, having seen the employment of giant, long-range rockets and of fleets of bomber aircraft whose raids killed thousands upon thousands of civilians. This war touched every German family in some way. The men, seventeen million in all, served in the armed forces. At the war's end the civilians in Germany's eastern and southern provinces, who had been spared much of the terror of aerial bombing, suffered rape, pillage and worse at the hands of the Red Army and of Tito's partisan forces. Every German was affected by the war; millions of them were killed.

The purpose of this book was to obtain and record the stories of ordinary Germans who served in the armed forces. The first avenue of approach was, of course, correspondence with friends in Germany and Austria. The second was through the editors of several ex-service journals who published my letters asking for material. Personal interview was a third source of stories as were the reminiscences of those who attended old comrades' reunions in Germany. In addition to those anecdotes which were written for this book, there were some that had been received too late for publication in books that I had written previously: *The Last Days of the Reich*, *The War Through German Eyes* and *Kommando*.

Then, too, there were certain battles for which no direct personal contributions came in and to cover those another source was sought. During the War German servicemen were encouraged to write for divisional or corps journals. Some of these stories were then reproduced in books published by the Reichs Propaganda Ministry. Men who claimed to have no story of their own service to report sent me photostats of many such official articles in the hope that these might be interesting enough to be included in these pages. Finally, there are a few letters or anecdotes which have been taken, with permission, from post-war military histories.

Inevitably, despite the several avenues of approach, there were some battles for which no stories or accounts were received. In Germany many felt themselves to be too old to write an accurate account, and death has taken

many who might have contributed. Nothing at all came in from the Russian-occupied zone of Germany, but sufficient material has been gathered to produce a view of service in the German forces written by the men who experienced it. In addition to the stories from the armed forces I have included a few civilian accounts which serve either as a supplement to the military events or as a counter-point to them.

To all those who have contributed to this work I send my most grateful thanks, as well as to the editors of German service and ex-service journals, magazines and publications through whose columns I gained many contacts.

What are written here are stories which could have been duplicated in the armed forces of any great nation that fought in the war, for service is the same in all of them. The difference is that these are German accounts; the stories of our principal opponents. These are anecdotes of victory and of defeat, of bravery, of boredom, of service life in barracks and of battle. They are the story of Everyman in uniform.

# Introduction

The German armed forces were organized as a single body well before the outbreak of the Second World War. The three original branches (the fourth the *Waffen SS*, was not yet included) were controlled by the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht – OKW*. The Head of State was also the Supreme Commander of OKW and orders from him were passed by his chief of staff to the commanders of the fighting services. The Army High Command (*Oberkommando des Heeres – OKH*) controlled the planning and operations of the ground forces just as Naval High Command (*Oberkommando der Marine – OKM*) and Air Force High Command (*Oberkommando der Luftwaffe – OKL*) controlled the planning and operations of their respective branches of service.

The Army was *primus inter pares* and this was reflected both in the hierarchy of the OKW which was dominated by the military and also by the operational demands of the army which were paramount. Both the navy and the air force were considered appendages to the principal combat effort – the ground fighting. Because its role was so well known, the handbook *Der Dienstunterricht im Heere – 1941* does not describe the army's tasks as it does those of the other services, but it does explain the duties of its constituent parts. The following extracts are from that handbook.

'In collaboration with the other arms [of Service] the Infantry gains the decision in a battle, captures enemy positions and holds them. It conducts close combat actions so as to destroy the enemy . . . The high mobility of the Cavalry makes its principal task one of reconnaissance. It is able, in collaboration with other troops, to act against the flanks and rear of enemy [forces] . . . The fire of the artillery supports the infantry both in attack and in defence and it can also engage targets which are behind cover . . . Engineers prepare the way forward for our own troops, repair roads, bridges, etc., remove obstructions and by erecting barricades impede the enemy . . .'

It is interesting to note that Panzer troops were not given much prominence in the 1941 regulations and that neither Paratroops nor SS units were included.

The army had always been the senior service and its commanders had been allowed a great deal of latitude in their approach to service matters. The assumption by Hitler of the role of Supreme Commander of the armed forces on 4 February 1938, began to change the relationship between the

Führer and his military commanders. The oath of allegiance which the army swore, in common with the other services, was of loyalty to him in person and thus bound every officer and man. They had to be loyal because they had pledged their word. There would, therefore, never be a revolt against any move which Hitler, as Supreme Commander, might make. The pre-war opposition to him from certain army circles was against his political and social policies, not his military ones. Not until July 1944, was there a plot to kill him, again, not because of his military mistakes, but because the removal of the Führer was seen as the only obstacle to Germany's obtaining concessions from the Allies.

Through his assumption of the role of Supreme War Lord, the Head of OKW, Hitler became the first soldier of the Reich, but for the first campaigns was content to let the field commanders work in the usual German Army fashion, that is with considerable operational latitude. He began to interfere more and more during the opening stages of the war against Russia and when, in the first disastrous winter on the Eastern Front, his strategy brought the army its first reverses, he seized the opportunity to replace many of its traditional leaders. Hitler retired them and named himself as Supreme Commander of the Army. In that capacity he directed operations on the Eastern Front only, but as Head of OKW, he controlled all the other fronts as well. Thus, in theory, as Head of OKW he issued orders to himself as Head of OKH. This ludicrous situation did not end there and his interference in military affairs grew during the war to the point where von Rundstedt complained that he could not even change the sentries on his HQ without advising the Führer.

The commanders' traditional independence of action no longer existed. Within the space of a few years Hitler had destroyed the General Staff system which had been created during the Napoleonic era. Thereby the brain of the German Army was effectively killed. Although, at intermediate levels of command, General Staff training and methods prevailed and kept the whole machine operating, the Army's Supreme Commander was a man who refused to admit the strategic limitations of time and space.

The structure of the army, like that of the Kriegsmarine or the Luftwaffe, was conventional, but the one thing that set the German Army apart from those of its opponents was its astounding flexibility in action. Nowhere was this demonstrated better than in the creation of battle groups, or Kampfgruppen. Whether in defence or attack a German commander could create a battle group out of the most diverse elements and commit it to the fight, confident that its men would fight as well in this *ad hoc* grouping as they would in a regular conventional formation. Much of the success of this flexible organization can be traced to the peculiar comradeship that bound the men; and this comradeship transcended rank to embrace superiors and subordinates. Officers messed with their men, although there were separate



messes in base areas. There was little or no class distinction; it was not unusual to find noblemen serving in the ranks and for senior commanders to have come from *petit bourgeois* or even working-class background.

One very sensible attitude which the army had was in its treatment of military criminals. These were not put into detention barracks where they would serve out their sentences in safety, but were grouped into punishment battalions. In such units a man had the opportunity to redeem the military honour he had forfeited by his sentence and was employed on such tasks as mine-laying, mine-lifting or spearheading 'death or glory' attacks. In the final stages of the war in Africa, the 999th Penal Division was sent to Tunisia. An NCO of the 962nd Regiment of that formation wrote a report on the fighting in those last weeks.

'American troops . . . began their attack on 25th April. They went to ground under fire but, covered by a well co-ordinated barrage, had soon worked their way forward to within hand-grenade range. My Platoon (in No 5 Company) covered the withdrawal of our battalion . . . We had heavy losses because my men had no recent experience of battle. One 42-year-old man who had been convicted of treason and who had helped to beat back the American assaults, said to me, "Sergeant, I don't care what happens now. I have won back my honour," and another man stood up in his slit trench firing a machine-gun and driving back the advancing Americans until he was wounded.'

The officers of the Penal Division were no less proud of the fighting ability of their military criminals, and one commander sought and obtained for some of them the award of the Iron Cross, Second Class.

The view held in the West was that the German serviceman was a robot-like creature, incapable or unwilling to act on his own initiative, drilled into submissive dumbness, unthinking and unimaginative. Those of us who fought the German soldiers, sailors and airmen soon realized that such descriptions of them were those of propagandists who had never met them in battle. We found that the rank and file were not robots but skilled soldiers and we learned that their officers were not the heel-clicking subserviants of Hollywood films, but men who, in the words of von Senger, the defender of Cassino, had a duty because, ' . . . the man in authority should devote himself to the protection of the weak [i.e., the men under his authority].' That precept was followed almost as a commandment up to very senior levels of command.

Officers were quick to defend their men against any unjustified criticism. There is on record the angry exchange of words between Helmut Wick, one of the Luftwaffe's top fighter aces and a senior commander in the Luftwaffe. This confrontation took place at the height of the battle of Britain, when the General visited Wick's front-line squadron and complained at not being saluted and pointed out that the men needed haircuts. Wick snapped

out, 'We are fighting an implacable enemy and are flying three or more missions every day. My ground staff are working 15 to 18 hours daily. Is not the winning of a battle more important than haircuts or salutes?' It was another Luftwaffe ace, Galland, who defended his pilots against Goering's charge of cowardice. Before the Reichsmarschall left the airfield, he made an effort to placate the angry airman and asked Galland if he needed anything. 'Yes,' came the reply. 'Give me a squadron of Spitfires.'

Hitler actually feared one army commander; the monocled Field Marshal Model. At one conference in which the Führer was deploying armies and giving instructions on how they were to be used, Model fixed his monocle firmly in his eye and asked, 'Who commands the Ninth Army, my Führer. You or I?' At more senior level von Rundstedt's reply to the OKW question, 'What shall we do now?', when the Allies broke through in France was, 'Make peace, you fools!', and the action of SS General Hausser in withdrawing his SS Divisions from Kharkov in defiance of Hitler's direct and unequivocal order saved them from destruction. When it was pointed out to him that to disobey the *Führerbefehl* was to risk his life he retorted, 'My old head does not matter. The lives of my young lads do matter.' Hausser's action was directly responsible for the Red Army's thrust towards Kharkov in the spring of 1943. Stalin knew of Hitler's order that the SS were to stand and to hold Kharkov and was convinced that they would obey those orders. When they did he would be able to destroy them inside the city. He had not reckoned with the Prussian officer's code of protecting the men under his command; a need applied at most levels of the military hierarchy. Paulus, in Stalingrad, and both Keitel and Jodl, at Führer HQ, were guilty of moral cowardice, but their actions prove the rule that a subordinate is not necessarily a rubber stamp. At the lowest military level the 'Spieß', the equivalent of a warrant officer, was concerned not so much with discipline as morale and was expected to represent very strongly to his superiors the views of the rank and file. The Spieß was a military welfare officer, the sort of 'agony aunt', that it has been proposed should be introduced into the British services. Examples will be found in these pages of officers and NCOs acting upon their own initiative to save a situation or to protect their men. Hollywood was never like this. To continue with the 1941 Handbook:

'The Navy.

Consists of the Fleet at Sea as well as shore-based naval artillery and naval infantry contingents. The Fleet Commander in Kiel commands the fleet. The naval land bases are under the control of the Baltic Naval Command (Kiel), or of North Sea Command (Wilhelmshaven.) The tasks of the naval land bases include coastal defence.

'The Air Force consists of flying units, anti-aircraft units, signals and the General Goering Regiment. The flying formations cover both land and sea squadrons . . .'

The relationship of the services to the State were that the army considered itself as having descended in unbroken line from the Napoleonic era. Indirectly it went even farther back; from the time of Frederick Wilhelm of Prussia who had introduced a form of military conscription. His son, Frederick the Great, brought in full conscription and produced a number of revolutionary military ideas such as marching in step and firing by volley. He also started a Staff system which was expanded after the defeat of Napoleon and refined by von Moltke in the 1860s. The army claimed that it had not been defeated in the field, in 1918, and most of the regiments had returned home as disciplined units. It had a tradition of undisputed loyalty.

The Kriegsmarine was a Service burdened with guilt. It was in the Imperial Navy that the Revolution had broken out in 1918, a movement which had overthrown the established order and had forced Germany to accept the terms of the Armistice. That stigma was still deeply felt and the leaders of the navy set themselves the task of being devotedly loyal to the Head of State – Adolf Hitler. Both Admiral Raeder and his successor, Doenitz, were such strong supporters of the regime that it was Doenitz, an admiral, and not an army commander, who was named to succeed to the leadership of the Third Reich after Hitler's suicide.

The Luftwaffe was considered by many, both inside and outside Germany, to be the most National Socialist of all the three services. That belief was based on the fact that Hermann Goering, one of Hitler's closest confidants, was its Supreme Commander. His boast, 'I command everything that flies in Germany,' brought under his control not only the conventional Luftwaffe but also the General Goering Regiment. This had begun as a police detachment but developed into a prototype parachute unit out of which evolved Germany's airborne forces. These, too, formed part of Goering's empire. In contrast to the Kriegsmarine, which was in a lowly position at the outbreak of the war but whose commander-in-chief rose to take supreme political power, the influence of the Luftwaffe, which was high at the outbreak of hostilities, declined because of its leader, Hermann Goering. He fell so much out of favour with Hitler in the last weeks of the war he was lucky not to have been killed by an SS execution squad.

The book *Der Dienstunterricht im Heere*, omits mention of the German paratroop force, just as it ignores the Waffen SS. Yet by 1941, its date of publication, paratroop formations had spearheaded the German Army's assault in the Low Countries and had captured the island of Crete from the British. At the war's end there was an entire Para Army on establishment and ten divisions fighting throughout Europe. By 1941, too, major formations of SS men had seen action in every campaign that the Wehrmacht had fought in continental Europe. It had become the fourth arm of service and by the end of the war thirty-nine divisions had been raised. Paradoxically, for a force which had once proclaimed its faith in Nordic, Aryan

superiority, the SS order of battle included not only divisions of Slavic Europeans but some Asian peoples. The Germanic SS created around themselves a legend of total dedication to battle, of élan in attack and of unbelievable tenacity in defence. To read the reports of some of their battle actions is like reading citations for the highest awards for bravery. Hardly unthinking robots and slavish obedience.

# Life in the Forces

From the year 1935, service in one of the armed forces was compulsory for every able-bodied German. In order to be accepted a recruit had to be both physically and mentally fit. He had also to be moral, i.e., not to have a criminal record and, of course, he had to be a German citizen. Volunteers were accepted, but conscription was the usual method of obtaining men for the services. The SS, was one of the exceptions to that rule and accepted only volunteers. So did the Fallschirmjaeger, although entry into that arm was more often a sideways transfer from some other arm into the Paras.

## SERVING THE FATHERLAND

The German men who were called to service immediately before or during the war would already have undergone a form of pre-military training in the RAD (the Reichsarbeitsdienst or Labour Corps.) In that short period of service they would have learned obedience and by hard work would have had their bodies strengthened and hardened. The following extract from Paul Kamberger shows how eagerly most young Germans looked forward to the opportunity to serve their Fatherland.

‘It was in 1943, when I, like so many others, volunteered for our unit [the 12th SS Division]. Even as schoolboys we had served as Luftwaffe auxiliaries and waited impatiently until the orders finally came to report for duty by 15th November to Unna in Westphalia. The train left about midnight from a blacked-out, empty station but imagine our joy when we found in our compartment boys with whom we had served in the Hitler Youth organization. We were all going to the same place and at each station more and more men of our own age entered the compartment each of them carrying the cardboard box or little suitcase – the mark which identified us all. In no time at all we had formed little groups and by the morning, when we reached our destination, there was a first-class feeling in the train.

‘The first day and a half were spent in processing us and grouping us formally and then we were off again, this time to an unnamed destination. We were the second contingent for the newly formed 12th SS Panzer Division “Hitler Youth”. We crossed the Belgian frontier and reached Turnhout where we detrained and began a march to the billets occupied by the newly created reconnaissance battalion. Soon we were on the parade

square waiting for things to happen – and they did. By this time our groups were about battalion size. Each of us joined the group with which he wished to serve, so that the battalions were, at first, of unequal strength. Then a group of about twelve officers began to march along the front of the groups. At our group, where we all wanted to be tank men, the officers halted and began a discussion. Then came the question, “Who is still at school?” Ten to twelve arms were raised. We were called out and lo and behold the motorcycle DR squadron of the division had been created. Fitters brought up the numbers of our cadre up to strength and we formed the No 1 Group of No 1 Platoon of No 1 Company.

‘We started the usual recruit training programme and shortly before Christmas had the task of putting on a show for the rest of the Company. This was such a great success that we were soon “booked” to perform for other Companies. Towards the end of February the actual DR course began and we were posted to a place called Zwanenstrand which was close to divisional headquarters. We climbed on to our Italian Moto-Guzzi machines for our first rides and passed our driving test in a hail storm on the road to Mol. Then we went on to more advanced training, with theoretic instruction followed by practical demonstrations of front-line conditions. This part of our training was often broken by our being called for service at Div HQ. The weeks flashed past and then the division was moved to France and we were equipped with brand-new German motor cycles with side-cars.’

The 12th SS Division ‘Hitler Youth’ was a unit which had been created and formed in great haste, but it had the advantage that each volunteer had the same background (service in the Hitler Youth Organization) and that each had reached the same level of training. This made it easier for the commanders to post men to the component units of the division without the need for special tests. In the case of other units or branches of service there had been, certainly in the early days of the war, time to give each recruit psychological tests in order to determine the particular branch of service for which he was best suited and to which he would be posted.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SIGNALS

One of the most interesting pieces of information on the organization of the German Army was sent to me by the celebrated author Franz Kurowski. This was, that one in every five soldiers was in Signals.

The Tsarist General Samsonov had sent his wireless messages *en clair* during the battles of August 1914, and an awareness of the disaster which had befallen him as a consequence was responsible for the German Signals Branch emphasis on total secrecy. Confidentiality of information was no less

important because the signalman was the first to receive or to decode a message. 'The enemy was always waiting to intercept signals upon which he could act or to which he could react. Particularly in the Signals Branch does the warning apply – The enemy never sleeps.' Kurowski wrote that the Signals detachment which served the German High Command was raised in 1938 as a battalion of Command Signals Regiment No 40, and was renumbered No 601 in August 1940. 'To this unit were seconded the finest signals operators from all three services and they were sent to a barracks at Ohrdruf where they carried out several training mobilization rehearsals. Then, in the second week of August 1939, Command Signals Battalion was called to action and only a few hours later had set out from Ohrdruf with all the wireless trucks and other vehicles. The convoy reached Berlin then left the autobahn and drove to Zossen where the Signals HQ of Army High Command was located. The majority of the battalion was quartered in the barracks at Zossen, but thirty specially selected signalmen were grouped into Wireless Centre "Zeppelin", which was the code-name for Zossen and the general term for the location of OKH and the General Staff of the Army.' One of that special group was Herbert Dammert whose story is recounted in the final chapters of this book.

It is of interest to note that the HQ of OKH remained at Zossen throughout the war – although individual personnel were often sent on detached duty with other major headquarters. It was only in the final weeks of the war that OKH and its ancillary organizations were forced to leave when the Soviets swept westwards. Russian reports state that when the Red Army overran and occupied 'Zeppelin' the telex machines were still chattering as messages continued to come in from distant signallers unaware that OKH had moved to a new location towards Denmark.

## CLEAN AND SMART

Recruit training was hard and unremitting and continued until each soldier, sailor or airman handled his weapon or carried out his duties thoroughly and without hesitation. As had been the case in the old Imperial and Weimar armies, each man was trained to do his superior's job and this ideal was striven for throughout the war.

Many barracks were old structures of which only the façades remained. All the internal fittings had been torn out and replaced with modern facilities. H. Werner was one of a number of men who described conditions in barracks, the scale of food and the types of uniform issues.

'All the interiors of the barracks were new and in place of the primitive ablutions which our fathers had described there were excellent shower



facilities and huge baths with constant hot water. Great emphasis was laid upon personal hygiene and at every meal the UvD [the Orderly Corporal] would inspect our hands and finger-nails to see that they were clean.

'Meals were basic but both well cooked and plentiful. Of course, I am describing recruit training. Active service was a different matter. There were several scales of active service rations issued generally, when one was out of the combat zone and in reserve. Flying service against the enemy countered towards the best ration scales – the same system applied in the army and navy. Those higher scales included alcohol – even champagne. Cigarettes, cigars or pipe tobacco were issued; many more men smoked pipes in those days than do now. Other desires were catered for – but only outside Germany – in Service-run brothels for which tickets were issued. Without a ticket it was not possible to get into a brothel.

'The pre-war services had a variety of uniforms, but by the time of my call-up [in 1942] the number had been reduced to a twill jacket and trousers for drill, training and fatigues as well as a proper uniform which served as combat dress, parade dress, walking-out dress and so on. The addition of various bits and pieces converted the jacket into Reporting Dress. Medals were worn on every jacket – except the white twill. We had a variety of things to put on to the breast of the jacket – Iron Crosses, sports badges, wound badges, and proficiency badges of all sorts. Nor were the jacket sleeves forgotten. On the left one were worn shields given for taking part in a particular operation such as "Narvik" or "Crimea", for example. On the upper right sleeve there were, later in the war, strips of lace denoting enemy tanks destroyed in close combat actions. On the cuffs there were titles like, "Crete" and "Afrika" which were "battle" commemorations. There were other cuff titles worn as identification by such units as "Grossdeutschland", by the SS divisions and regiments and by certain squadrons of the Luftwaffe. We were, from the point of view of uniform, a good-looking lot.'

In the Kriegsmarine as well as in the Luftwaffe, both of which had fixed bases – either the ship or the airfield – meals were regular and the several types of uniform were on issue throughout the war. The navy put its men into barracks when they were not at sea, to relieve them of the claustrophobic strain of shipboard life. Submariners were treated almost like gods and were sent out on their voyages or welcomed home from them with bands, flowers and guards of honour.

## SEX AND DISCIPLINE

In the matter of sex the German nation and its Services were not generally guilt-ridden about carnal feelings. The problem and its solution were approached pragmatically. Servicemen need sexual relief, but they must be

protected against venereal diseases. The solution was to set up military brothels where the girls could be controlled and to which soldiers had access. From discussions I have had it would seem that no regulations covering the Services were laid down. Control seems to have been exercised at local command level and some commanders at that level were not keen on their men endangering their health in such a way. One paratroop officer could not forbid his men to use the brothels, but, in the words of one of his former subordinates:

‘He made our visits as difficult as possible. Those wanting to obtain a green ticket which would authorize a visit to the nearest brothel, some 8 kilometres distant, had to parade in full kit and personal firearm and was required to march from our camp area to the brothel and back again – in full equipment. During the sexual interlude the kit and equipment might be removed, but once the act had been concluded the Fallschirmjaeger was now faced with an 8-kilometre march back to camp. The system worked quite well in deterring those whose sexual lust was not so powerful and the Company Commander seemed to have been successful in his endeavours until the Christmas concert party troupe displayed its talents. This concert was organized at regimental level and our battalion’s main turn remained a closely guarded secret until the opening night. Up went the curtain and across the small stage there parade-marched i.e., goose-stepped, in full equipment, a stage army. The single line of soldiers wearing full equipment marched round and round, each Jaeger waving his green “brothel” slip. The Captain left us not long after this.’

Adolf Strauch recalled an incident involving a military brothel: ‘This particular place was open for Other Ranks until lunch time and for officers in the afternoon. Late one afternoon an NCO approached the building and was told by the sentry that it was out of bounds to him at that particular time. The NCO refused to obey the sentry’s Dienstliche Befehl to go away whereupon the sentry, very properly, shot him dead.’

The young men of the ‘Hitler Youth’ Division in Normandy before D-Day, were so young that they were considered ineligible for sexual delights or for the pleasures of smoking. They were issued with boiled sweets in lieu of cigarettes, but I have been unable to find out what the other substitute was. Services which recruit from every strata of society must, inevitably, contain homosexuals in their ranks and the perversions of such people were forbidden and punished under Article 179 of Military Law. Persistent offenders were often transferred to penal detachments after sentencing by a court-martial.

Strauch’s description of the sentry at the brothel door mentioned the term ‘Dienstliche Befehl’. This was a form of summary justice under which an NCO or an officer – or in this case a sentry – was given great authority. An order that was not obeyed promptly would be repeated twice more and

then the person in authority would issue the final warning, 'I am giving you the Dienstliche Befehl [the official order].' Refusal by the offender to comply empowered a superior to shoot him.

Discipline was firm but fair. The 'Spiess' – a combination of warrant officer and shop floor representative – looked after the interests of the men. The SS broke down many barriers between ranks and in the 1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte, for example, any private soldier had the right of direct access to the most senior commanders. The use of 'Herr', in the sense of 'Herr Major', 'Herr General', etc., was abolished in the SS – the rank alone being considered a sufficient courtesy when addressing a comrade.

The welfare of the men and their dependants was not only a national but also a unit concern. In December 1939, Sepp Dietrich, commander of the Leibstandarte, set up a small secretariat to deal with just that problem. The committee's terms of reference were to consider:

- '1. Welfare of the next of kin of fallen, accidentally killed or missing members of the Leibstandarte.
2. Welfare of wounded or convalescent members.
3. General welfare for those who have left dependants at home while they are in the Field.'

An example of the second term of reference was in the letters which each company commander wrote to his men when they were in hospital and the visits to sick comrades which were arranged at unit level. Goering, as Supreme Commander of the Luftwaffe, had begun such welfare projects even before the war and upon its outbreak ordered that the children of airmen killed in action were to receive cash grants and special help in education. He was determined that the families of those who had fallen for Germany, or who had been severely wounded in her service, should not be penalised financially, for the sacrifices they had made.

## VOLUNTEERS FOR ADVENTURE

The term 'comrade' was a term widely used in all the services and among all the arms of service. Most men in the Wehrmacht really did see themselves as comrades taking a personal part in Germany's fight. Thus many who were in non-combatant units volunteered for more adventurous regiments as the following account by Reinhold Hoffmann shows.

'In April 1941 there was an appeal made throughout the Luftwaffe for volunteers to the paratroops. My comrade, Corporal Goldnagel, and I submitted our names and were sent to Paris for inspections, interviews, X-rays and all sorts of medical tests before being released on 15th May, and sent to Quedlinburg. From there we were ordered to report to the Flak Machine Gun battalion, which was in Greece preparing for the Crete

operation. Then we learned that more drafts of new recruits were expected and that we were to form something new in the Para organization. We would be No 5 Company and would be equipped with small searchlights. By 20th May, the strength of our detachment had grown to 230 men, many of them young soldiers who had been in operational Luftwaffe squadrons, AA regiments and signals units. Our Company commander, Lieutenant Geyer, a veteran of the campaign in Holland, was not very happy at being left behind to train recruits while his comrades were fighting at Corinth.

‘By this time the attack upon Crete had begun and so many men had been lost that we recruits were asked whether we would be prepared to make a para drop even though we had had no jump training. Most of us volunteered but as it turned out we were not needed. We then began a period of infantry and close combat instruction which grew progressively harder with each succeeding week. By the first week of June the Company, now fit for active service, was posted to the Para Training School at Braunschweig-Broitzen. The Company commander and some of the senior NCOs were old hands – the rest of us were all beginners. Nothing was made easy for us in that training school. From Monday to Friday we practised forward and backward rolls as well as all the other Para drills and on Saturday our instructors gave us instruction in infantry combat. It was hard graft but at the end of the fourth week we had our obligatory six jumps behind us and were finally recognized as Fallschirmjaeger. A few men of our group asked to be returned to their parent units after having made just one jump and one other was nearly killed during the training period. This was Sergeant Hammelmann who caught a leg in the canopy lines and started to come down head first. As he fell he had the presence of mind to reach up and grab some of the canopy lines to pull himself upright. He landed safely.

‘The war against Russia had already begun and many men believed that the campaign would end before we got into battle. Experiences in the Crete campaign had shown the need for a battalion motor-cycle Company and we were converted to that role during a three-week course at Altengraben. Part of that training [on the course] was carried out with live ammunition and we worked with light tanks in attacking strong points and bunkers. For this we were given Assault Engineer training. In our free time, and to relieve ourselves of the strain of training, we went out with the girls in the local munitions factory, although this was strictly forbidden and could lead to several days’ confined to barracks if we were caught. During August we went back to Quedlinburg and met up with the four companies which had served in Crete. As part of a battalion which was considered by Corps to be “ready for action”, we new boys were given leave at the same time as the veterans. It was our first leave. When we returned we were posted to the training ground at Grafenwoehr where we practised mass drops and ended that period of training with a route-march through the Main river valley. We had also

been lucky enough to have stage and screen artists to entertain us and were well treated by the authorities in Wuerzburg.

'By the end of September the battalion, now up to strength, moved to Radom in Poland. During October No 3 Company was posted to the Neva river sector of the Eastern Front while the rest of the battalion stayed in Radom and began to plan for Christmas and New Year. One Saturday, just before the first group was due to go on leave, we were ordered to parade in a hut. The doors were shut and after the Senior Sergeant had reported the Company present and correct, our new commander, Captain Parnitzke, told us that all leave had been cancelled and that we were to prepare for active service near St. Petersburg. The other Companies of the Battalion had looked down upon us as new boys, but now we, too, were going on active service and this would make us their equals. Some of our group got too enthusiastic and went out on an illegal shoot in order to practise their sniping abilities. They were caught by the Military Police and as a punishment were declared not fit to go with us on active service. They were posted to another Company which was going back to Germany. We others, were issued with winter clothing and during the first days of November were loaded into railway trucks and sent southwards. We were on our way to war.'

One of the phenomena of war was the longing of men on leave to return as quickly as possible to their units on active service. It was surprising that men who had been a long time in battle were often unable to adjust to civilian attitudes in the homeland. The civilian environment had become alien and Home had become the regiment. It was to the regiment and to his mates in it that the soldier's thoughts returned once the initial excitement of leave had worn off and Adolf Strauch's account opens with his hunger to return to the company of his fellows.

'In March 1943, I rejoined my unit from leave. I had been away a long time from those mates who had shared so much with me and I looked forward to seeing them again. On arriving at Moumelon I found that my unit, No 8 Company of 2nd Fallschirmjaeger Regiment, had been sent to Rennes in Brittany for a para jump exercise. I set out to find them and you can imagine the high old time we had when I finally caught up with them. But the pleasure of that reunion was brief. Lieutenant Kirsten, the Company Commander, told me that the course which I had just completed meant immediate posting to Battalion Headquarters as Sergeant Armourer. With a pen stroke I had become a base wallah. I was not overjoyed at the prospect, not so much because I objected to the change, but rather more because that posting meant that I could not take part in this series of jumps with my Company. From earlier experience we had learned that a Jaeger was virtually unarmed when he touched down and that his search for the weapons container either took too long or was just not possible under active service conditions. For that reason our Company was to experiment with making

jumps while carrying weapons. It seemed at first, that I would only be able to watch as my comrades jumped but then I was told permission had been given for me to jump with my detachment because on active service it would be my task to defend HQ Group. My favourite weapon was the MG 42, and soon I stood in front of the old "Auntie", Ju 52, holding my bride, the MG 42, in my arms and linked to her by a drop line.

'First Act. We received the order to board and climbed into the machine. As I would be the first to jump my seat was nearest the door and Sergeant Stark, with whom I had discussed the details of the drop, sat opposite me. It had been decided that before and during the jump I should carry the MG clasped to my chest and that just before touchdown I would release the gun and lower it on a rope so that it would not be damaged on landing. Because I was hindered by the MG in my arms, I could not take up the regulation position in the doorway and would also be unlikely to hear the klaxon sounding when the order came "Prepare to jump". It was arranged that one of my comrades would hit me on the parachute pack as the signal to leave the machine.

'Second Act. It was a lovely day; good vision and no turbulence. The order came "Get ready!" We stood up, clipped our hooks on to the fixed line and waited for the next order "Ready to jump!" I moved to the door and crouched there. Below me there was a wood, then a wide flat area which I took to be the ground around the airfield. I leaned forward into the aircraft's slipstream and felt a thump on my chute; the sign to jump. I flung myself out of the aircraft.

'Third Act. With the MG pressed to my chest I fell through the air and then felt the welcome thump as the canopy opened. I began to swing and looked around me expecting to see my comrades. But there was no one above or on either side of me and the aircraft was disappearing rapidly into the distance. I was alone – unsupported. What a feeling. Below me I could see nothing but trees and did not dare imagine what would soon happen. I was lucky and my landing was made on soft grass in a small clearing. Although burdened with the machine-gun in my right hand I had landed on my feet and had not needed to make either a forward or backward roll. The canopy collapsed around me. Well that had really been a super drop. Thinking about what had happened brought me to the obvious conclusion that what I had thought to be the blow telling me to jump had been premature. I had made a real dog's dinner of the exercise.

'Final Act. I now had the task of catching up with my comrades. Burdened down with parachute and MG I hurried over ditches and fences. Finally I reached a road. An ambulance and a staff car came towards me. In the latter was Pit, the Commanding Officer. I came to attention and made my report fully expecting the standard three days' punishment. But the "old man" just laughed and said, "Dismiss lad. It was just rotten luck."

# The Years of Peace

The Wehrmacht can be said to have been created in 1935, when Adolf Hitler announced the reintroduction of conscription together with the creation of a new Luftwaffe and a programme of national rearmament.

Conscription for the armed forces was a normal feature of German life and not seen as the grotesque infringement of liberty that many in Britain considered it to be. The condition of the Treaty of Versailles which abolished conscription, was the one most bitterly resented. It struck at the heart of German pride; a national army, for it was no empty boast that the German Army was the German people under arms.

The conditions of the Treaty also restricted the size and power of the German Army and Navy and forbade absolutely a military air force. Senior German soldiers, of whom Hans von Seeckt was the most prominent, together with politicians of the Weimar government sought ways to circumvent those restrictions. Service officers of outstanding ability, whose skills would produce a professional, skilled army and navy, were retained in the Reichswehr. The rank and file for both services would be obtained by voluntary enlistment and, in fact, so many men came forward that only the very best were chosen – those with leadership potential who would become instructors or officers when conscription was reintroduced and the services were expanded.

Under the terms of a secret agreement between Soviet Russia and the Weimar government senior members of the German High Command were allowed to use training grounds beyond the Urals where they could apply in practice their new theories of warfare. The principles of mass employment of armour were developed in the late 1920s and early 1930s in the training grounds of Kazan. In those remote regions of Russia, flying training was carried out with powered aircraft. It is no exaggeration to say that the strategy and tactics of *Blitzkrieg*, that revolutionary form of warfare, were designed and developed during those years of collaboration between Soviet Russia and Weimar Germany.

Adolf Hitler's assumption of power in January 1933, ended the close collaboration between the two countries, but the leaders of the German Army had by this time perfected the techniques they were to use throughout the Second World War, and the Luftwaffe had a pool of trained pilots. In addition there were hundreds of young men who had been trained in the



glider schools of the Hitler Youth Organization and who would become pilots when a new Luftwaffe was created. Thus, when Hitler proclaimed the rebirth of the German armed forces in 1935, he knew not only that he had a skilled High Command and a reservoir of potential officers for the three services, but that re-armament would give those soldiers of the Third Reich the best possible weapons. That proclamation of the restoration of national dignity achieved for the Führer two other important objectives. Re-armament meant employment and conscription would take men from the dole queues. Those two things taken in combination would abolish unemployment in Germany.

The Nazi Party reinforced the age-old boast of the German Army being the German people under arms with a new slogan – ‘It is an honour to undertake military service on behalf of the German people.’ The Party’s political charter, drawn up in the 1920s, had mocked the ‘mercenary army of Weimar’, and had also laid down that only German citizens had the right to bear arms in her defence. The idea of peace-time conscription, of restricting the right to bear arms to native-born citizens and of military service being an honour, were alien to the British people who refused to be alarmed at German re-armament or frightened as that nation’s policies gained pace. The British comforted themselves with the fact that Germans were forced to eat *ersatz* foodstuffs and that the German Army was equipped with mock tanks. There were stories of British motorists driving through Germany and encountering soldiers wheeling cardboard or plywood vehicles. The myth was believed that the panzer force was made up of such vehicles.

The reality was different. It was true that the Army did use mock-up tanks and vehicles on manoeuvres – but this was an example of German thrift. On things that mattered expenditure was lavish. Naval gunnery was improved by frequent target practice and by the fitting into ships of the finest optical ranging equipment. German factories produced tanks of standard pattern designed to fit the concepts of *Blitzkrieg* – vehicles which were capable of being improved as the need arose without the need for radical design changes or the creation of new designs. The Luftwaffe, too, received modern aircraft armed with cannon and not machine-guns and had introduced new, deadly combat tactics.

By 1938, the scale of re-armament and the size of her forces through conscription, had brought Germany’s forces nearly to a war footing. In March 1938 the Germans annexed Austria and accepting Hitler’s pretext that this was a German internal matter, a question of Germans in Austria wishing to be reunited with the Reich, the politicians of Europe did nothing. As a result of the *Anschluss* the strength of the German Army was increased by a number of Austrian, specialist, mountain troops, an armoured division and by conventional infantry formations. In the autumn of 1938, Hitler’s pressure upon the government of Czechoslovakia produced a fear of war in

Europe which was only averted by the sacrifice of the Czech Government of an area known as the Sudetenland. Once again the accepted pretext was that the Germans in the Sudetenland only wished to be incorporated into the Reich.

The sacrifice of the Czechs was in vain. In the spring of 1939, Hitler used the threat of massed bombing of the city of Prague to intimidate Hacha, the Czech president into allowing his country to be 'protected' by a German occupying force. Panzer forces struck across the border and units of the newly created airborne forces stood ready for action in the event of any Czech resistance. Hitler arrived in Prague and slept in the Hradschin castle, the palace of the former Kings of Bohemia and the seat of government. But that act of aggression could no longer be justified as the wish of Germans to be united in the Reich; the Czechs were a Slavic people. Slowly the nations of the West realized that Hitler was determined on war. This was not, however, the Führer's last territorial claim in Europe. During March 1939, he forced Lithuania to cede the city of Memel, and Hitler was ready for the next step in his programme. 'Case White', the plan for a war against Poland was prepared and the most significant sentence in the speech which Hitler made to his senior commanders was, 'We cannot expect a repetition of the Czech affair. We must prepare ourselves for war.'

The German forces were trained and ready when it came. That statement requires qualification – they were prepared and well armed, but for the wrong type of war. Hitler had planned to fight a series of continental land battles. Each brief war would destroy a particular enemy and when each was defeated there would be a short period of retraining and re-equipping before the forces went out to fight the next enemy. The Wehrmacht was armed to fight campaigns for which only tactical weapons would be required. No thought had been given that there might be a need for strategic weapons. The war, as Hitler planned it, would be confined to the European landmass. Aircraft were seen as long-range artillery and thus the Luftwaffe had no squadrons of long-range bombers to match the range and power of the machines which Bomber Command brought into service. In the case of the Kriegsmarine there were too few U-boats, destroyers or cruisers to counter the Allied navies. Neither was there steel in sufficient quantities, nor the factory capacity available to produce the required number of vessels. It came to a clash of priorities; whether raw materials and factory space should be devoted to ship construction, to tank production or to making aircraft. This was a question that was never satisfactorily resolved.

At the opening of the war the equipment was good, the men were well trained and the nation had been directed, however unknowingly, to the prospect of war. By adroit political negotiation a non-aggression pact had been signed between the Third Reich and the USSR. The significance of that pact was that in the coming war Germany would not have to fight on two

fronts. Hitler and his Foreign Secretary, von Ribbentrop, had neutralized the danger from the East while the armies of the Anglo-French allies would be held in check by the West Wall, the Siegfried Line. Europe waited to see upon which of his neighbours Hitler's baleful attention would fall. A rising campaign of hate propaganda indicated that it would be Poland.

# The Invasion of Poland, 1939

## OPERATION 'WHITE'

As a result of her occupation of the rump of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, Germany outflanked Poland to the south just as her East Prussian province outflanked that country to the north. Thus even before war came geography had determined its strategy and OKW needed only to exploit Poland's inferior geographical position.

Hitler's Directive for Operation 'White', was, ' . . . the annihilation of the Polish Army . . . ' to achieve which OKW planned a double encirclement of the enemy forces. One encirclement would be to the west and the other to the east of Warsaw. In the next phase of the Operation the Polish Army was to be destroyed in the bend of the River Vistula. Then would come the third and final stage; the capture of the Polish capital. The Poles accepted that their army, outflanked and outnumbered, would have to give ground in the west of the country and their strategy was to fall back upon a succession of river lines along which they planned to hold their opponents.

The German operational plan was for Tenth Army of Army Group South to concentrate its motorized and panzer forces and to strike out of Upper Silesia. On either side of Tenth Army's thrust, the Fourteenth Army below it and Eighth Army above it were to 'prevent the enemy in the area between Posen and Kutno from hindering Tenth Army's advance'. Army Group North's Fourth Army, advancing out of East Pomerania and Third Army out of East Prussia, were to advance south-eastwards and southwards along the Vistula and occupy the enemy's defensive positions along that river line before the retreating Poles could occupy them.

In statistical terms the German Army, one and a quarter million men strong, faced 800,000 Poles. The Germans exercised a superiority in infantry of 3.3 to 1; in artillery of 4.3 to 1, and in armour of 8.2 to 1. Against the panzer host the Poles could pit only nine companies of 8-ton tanks and twenty-nine companies of armoured weapons carriers. Supporting the German Army in the field were 1,600 Luftwaffe aircraft. The Poles had only a quarter of that number.

The Operation progressed very much as OKW had planned. The Polish forces in the western part of the country pulled back, not only because they were outflanked but because the speed of the German advance in the south

was threatening Warsaw. The Polish army in the west hurried to link up with the garrison in the capital. Army Group South in hard and bitter fighting was able to prevent this. In the bend of the River Bzura the Polish Posnan Army, which had tried and failed to fight its way through to Warsaw, was encircled and destroyed. The campaign closed with a total victory for the Germans and with shocking losses to the Poles. In a letter home one man of the Leibstandarte SS recorded his impressions of the stricken area between Modlin and Warsaw.

‘Our advance took us across that part of the battlefield which had been held by the so-called Pomorze Army. The whole area was a scene of death and destruction. The bloated bodies of men and animals blackening under the hot sun, smashed carts, burnt out vehicles and those most tragic victims of war, the wounded horses, waiting for the mercy shot. Everywhere there was evidence of a beaten army covering the ground. Now I understand what the words of the Army song mean, “Man, and horse and wagon – the Lord God struck them down . . .”’

It was not the German Army alone that had struck the Polish Army down. The Soviet invasion on 19 September, trapped it between both its enemies. The campaign had lasted less than three weeks and was the first practical demonstration of the revolutionary theory of *Blitzkrieg*. Although the purists of the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine had not been able to operate armour in the mass in quite the way they had proposed, the successes gained by their fast-moving, wide-ranging thrusts had excited Hitler’s imagination. The victory in Poland confirmed his view that the war in Europe would be won in a series of short, land-based campaigns fought with the sort of tactical weapons with which he had equipped his armed forces.

The dynamic of *Blitzkrieg* was movement, fire and surprise. Movement lay in the rapid thrusts of armoured formations. Fire came from the Luftwaffe’s bombers used as long-range weapons in support of ground operations. The third element, surprise, was gained by the attack upon a foreign country in advance of a formal declaration of war. *Blitzkrieg* took some time to develop and before the ground units could begin their wide-sweeping operations, it was the task of the Luftwaffe to spring the surprise by carrying out massive air strikes. These were intended to crush the enemy air force on the ground and to overwhelm its remnant in the air. The scenario of the *Blitzkrieg* against Poland set the pattern for succeeding operations.

On 1 September 1939, Hitler announced in a speech to the Reichstag that he had ordered his forces to retaliate against Polish ‘aggression’. Even before the Führer had made that declaration the Polish Air Force had been all but destroyed. At 0440 hours, nearly half a day in advance of Hitler’s speech, a force of two hundred and nineteen Ju 87s had spearheaded the Luftwaffe’s first blow. Their attacks were followed by those of fighter squadrons which machine-gunned aircraft drawn up on airfields across

Poland. Then came medium bombers to destroy the airfield installations with low-level attacks. Finally, the Stukas came back again to smash anything that had survived the first onslaughts.

## BLACK HUSSARS OF THE AIR

The heady excitement of those first days was recalled by Franz Heimann, who served with a Stuka squadron during the Polish campaign. 'Returning crews gave us vivid accounts of the missions they had flown. They told of bodies of troops; whole formations of infantry, breaking and running when the "Black Hussars of the Air" as the Stukas were eventually to become known, dropped out of the sky with Jericho sirens howling. Noise; not that of exploding bombs, but nerve-shattering sirens, had become a weapon of war.'

By the time the first army units crossed the frontier the Polish Air Force had been attacked and crushed. Some squadrons did manage to put machines into the air on that first day and for several days thereafter, but these were a forlorn hope fighting an unequal battle. Once the Luftwaffe had gained air supremacy it was free for other tasks – area bombing of Poland's principal cities and low-level attacks against troop concentrations. Precision bombing was carried out by the Stuka pilots who were able to achieve a greater accuracy than the conventional, horizontal bombers, because they aimed the whole machine directly at the target.

On peace-time manoeuvres the Stukas had gained a reputation for accuracy. They demonstrated that ability in Poland. Franz Heimann was proud of belonging to an élite unit.

'One of the first raids which our Geschwader undertook and, certainly one of the most important of the whole campaign, was intended to capture the huge double bridge across the Vistula. At briefing our pilots had been told that there were several firing points in houses near the bridge from which Polish military engineers could explode the charges and destroy it.

'There was no way in which army units could take out those firing points. The bridge was primed for demolition and would be blown up before the army could capture it. But the task of taking out the firing points was a very suitable target for the Luftwaffe. Tactics for the attack were based on the knowledge that single dive-bombers flying at high level would not arouse suspicion among the Poles around the bridge. These tactics were successful. The machines of our Geschwader flew singly to the target and once over it carried out a co-ordinated attack. Before the Poles could react and set off the charges the Stukas had destroyed the firing-point houses.'

There was a sequel to the story. A wounded Polish engineer knitted some cables together and detonated a number of charges but his heroic action

was in vain. The explosions only smashed part of the superstructure, causing slight damage to the railway track and to the roadway, both of which were quickly repaired. Within hours, the armoured train which had been waiting to cross, passed over the Vistula, leading the advance of an entire Corps.

In Franz Heimann's narrative the words 'suitable targets' occur and the interpretation of those words was a source of friction between the two Services. The Luftwaffe expressed its policy in the statement, 'The Luftwaffe does not recognize friend or foe, but only suitable targets.' Such an attitude could and did lead to tragic accidents when friendly troops were attacked in error. Hans-Ulrich Schumann of 1st Panzer Division recalled just such an incident.

'As aircraft recognition signals we carried national flags and draped these across the bonnets of cars and over the turrets of panzer. The infantry laid similar flags along their forward line. These signals were intended to let the Luftwaffe know our positions and they were supposed to bomb forward of the flags. But there were many tragic mistakes in which vehicles were bombed, which were not only clearly marked with flags but which were several kilometres behind our lines.

'Of course, one has to accept that in the stress of active service conditions occasional mistakes do occur. My point is that they ought not to have occurred so frequently because Luftwaffe liaison officers had been attached to army formations at divisional level for years before the war began. Those liaison officers had wireless communication with the airborne squadrons so that they could direct the aircraft in accordance with the tactical situation. But even that link could not prevent mistakes. I remember an incident when our advance was stopped dead because of a lack of liaison between the Luftwaffe and ourselves. Our reconnaissance unit was advancing rapidly towards the bridge at Gora Kalvarya. It had fought down Polish resistance on both sides of the river and had radioed back telling the divisional armour that the way ahead was clear. Hardly had that message been passed when Stukas came diving down and blew up the bridge in front of us. It was a bitter joke to ask on whose side the Luftwaffe was fighting.'

## FROM PEACE TO WAR

Erich Hoppe, was another correspondent who had served with 1st Panzer Division in Poland. At the outbreak of war he was a junior NCO in a Schuetzen (later Panzergrenadier) regiment.

'It is half a century since the war with Poland began and because I do not recall dates and times with total accuracy, I have consulted the history of our Division to fill those gaps in my narrative which my memory cannot. Rolf Stoves's work confirms my impression that the attack upon Poland was



to have begun during the last week of August. We marched, or perhaps I should say we rode, because we Schuetzen were lorried infantry, towards the border with Poland. I do recall that the move was made in bright moonlight. Some distance from the frontier area the lorries halted, we infantry dismounted and began a foot march to the concentration area. When we reached that place there seemed to be a great deal of activity going on among the officers. Nothing happened to us for several hours and then the latrine rumours started. We were not to cross the frontier that night, nor were we to pull back from the area which we had reached. We were, instead, to stay under cover and remain undetected by the Poles until the date for a new D-Day was announced. Later that evening our officers confirmed the rumours.

‘All that first day we lay concealed in the woods and at last light were pulled back because it would have been impossible for a large body of men to have remained undetected by the Poles for very long. We marched out of concealment, picked up the transport and returned to our previous camp. Then, late in the afternoon of 31st August, officers were called to a conference and afterwards they briefed us. We were to march back to the concentration area that night. We reached it sometime about 2200hrs. Our divisional history says that it was midnight but I seem to recall it being earlier than this. We were not allowed to light fires, nor to smoke and we were ordered not to move about unnecessarily or to make noise.

‘The next morning, just after dawn, there was a lot of noise and much movement as our divisional recce and panzer units moved forward. Then our lorries were brought up. We climbed in and set off. We were at war and yet it all seemed as normal as a peace-time exercise. After about an hour’s drive along roads – tracks would have been a better description – our lorried column pulled into a field. We stood about for some considerable time and welcomed the arrival of the field kitchens. We had had our evening meal in Germany in peace-time. Now we were at war and breakfasting in Poland.

‘We were at war but there was no sound of conflict, except for a low rumble which could have been thunder but wasn’t. It was gunfire, but very distant. There was a great deal of air activity, but otherwise nothing. That first morning of the war was a warm, bright, quiet and peaceful one. I do not remember my feelings about war being declared. As a soldier I had a duty to do and that was that. I don’t even remember an Order of the Day being read out to us, although I expect there was one; there usually was. Our transition from peace-time status to war footing did not occur that first morning. Our baptism of fire came next day and after that we knew what warfare meant.’

## DESTROYING THE POSNAN ARMY

R. Buchbinder was from a family of professional soldiers. Born in the first year of the Great War, he had enlisted in 1932, and rose quickly from recruit to commissioned rank. His story shows the war from the viewpoint of the trained staff officer.

‘To read the stories that have been written of the campaign in Poland in the autumn of 1939, is to gain a false impression of that operation. A lot was written, by contemporary propaganda sources, of the “18-day victory march”. It was nothing of the sort. There were times when it seemed that our rapid advance had taken us too far and had placed the outcome of the whole campaign in jeopardy.

‘Shortly before the outbreak of war I was seconded from the panzer regiment with which I was serving to take up a junior staff appointment in General Reinhardt’s 4th Panzer Division. My pre-war training had been as a staff officer alternating, as was customary, with troop appointments. Now I had been detached from the panzer regiment and been returned to staff duties at divisional level.

‘In the Polish campaign, Reinhardt’s 4th Panzer Division (still known at that time as Division Reinhardt) together with its sister formation, 1st Panzer Division, formed Hoepfner’s 16 Corps, in Army Group South. The advance towards Warsaw had been a brilliant display of our General’s ability and within eight days of D-Day, we were at the gates of Warsaw. Our GSO I was concerned that Corps formed a long and narrow salient, running on a general line from east/west. Of more immediate concern to him was that we were not in touch with either 1st Panzer, on our right flank, or with any German formation on the left. We were, in a sense, completely isolated. When we closed up towards Warsaw Reinhardt expressed doubt about the wisdom of committing armour in built-up areas. In a Sitrep to Corps dated 9th September, he wrote, “This morning’s attack upon Warsaw was called off because of the severe losses we had suffered. As the city is defended very strongly . . . a single Panzer Division with only four battalions of infantry is too weak to undertake an attack with any prospect of success . . . We shall not renew the attack but shall block off those roads leading to Warsaw from the west which might be used by the retreating Polish army. To carry out that task 4th Panzer needs more infantry as armour by itself cannot hold ground . . .”

‘During that day Operations Section was advised that a vast mass of undefeated Polish formations stood at our back. These should have been encircled and destroyed by formations following behind us but this had not happened and now the Poles were behind us, a strong and well-armed force. Our reconnaissance units reported each new enemy sighting and this was marked on the map. Soon an ugly rash of enemy circles far outnumbered

our friendly ones. It was not known at that time that those enemy markings represented the huge masses of men, guns, horses and vehicles of General Kutrzeba's Posnan Army. Nor that the General had expressed his determination to fight his way past us so as to bring the Posnan army into Warsaw. By last light on the 9th his force was centred around Sochaczew, clearly regrouping before the grand assault.

'The isolated 4th Panzer Division stood in the path of Kutrzeba's army and was not deployed to meet his blow. Consider the situation – on the 8th we had been advancing eastwards towards the Polish capital. Now, only a day later, we had to meet an attack from the west. Reinhardt was faced with a difficult decision. If he turned the whole of 4th Panzer to face the Posnan Army this would invite attack by the strong enemy forces inside Warsaw. His solution was to place certain divisional formations back to back. Unit commanders were told of the serious situation and warned that hard fighting lay ahead. We alone, he told them, had to stop Kutrzeba. The only reinforcement which Corps could give was a battle group composed of the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler and a battalion of the 103rd Artillery Regiment. That force was rushed forward to plug a gap in our line which had been created when our 7th Reconnaissance Battalion was overrun and almost totally destroyed. That small group of SS and artillery took up position facing westwards – confronting the Posnan army. A mixed group of 4th Panzer Division infantry, artillery and anti-tank guns faced eastwards, i.e., towards Warsaw. Between those two outward-facing groups lay the bulk of 4th Division's 12th Schuetzen Regiment and the division's two panzer regiments, forming a fire brigade reserve which could be switched from one danger point to another as the situation demanded.

'There were in that area of Poland, in those days, very few hard surface roads and these, such as they were, connected the provincial capitals with Warsaw. All other roads were unsurfaced, being little more than cart tracks. Such surfaces were suitable for light units, infantry and cavalry, but heavy equipment needed hard surfaces. Kutrzeba was determined to take his heavy weapons into Warsaw. It was the wrong decision to make and it cost the Poles the Posnan Army.

'Reinhardt was not a defensively minded commander. He was a panzer leader who believed in aggressive action. The SS on the western flank were ordered to attack and while Kutrzeba's attention was drawn to that sector Reinhardt flung our panzer regiments northwards to cut the Modlin-Warsaw road. It was fascinating to watch the development of the battle from maps and to have these moves explained by the GSO at evening briefings. The General was correct in his appreciation of how the Poles would react. The Warsaw garrison and the Posnan army were not so able. They did not see our attacks as the desperate struggles of an outnumbered force, but thought they were evidence that we had been massively reinforced. Acting upon that

misappreciation they saw it as essential to break through before even more German forces could arrive. All these things we learned later from prisoner interrogation.

'Of course, our division's attacks were not made without loss and by 11th September, half of our panzers were non-operational. Some of these non-runners were the result of a lack of spares, fuel and ammunition because no supplies were coming forward. A desperate crisis built up as markings on the operational map showed where the Poles were concentrated most strongly and where their attacks was fiercest. At Mokotov a battalion of their tanks charged and furious assaults on the SS sector gained some ground. If that terrible pressure was maintained there was the fear that our forces would drain away. By heroic endeavours our men held the enemy and the Polish attacks weakened in intensity and reduced in number. No sooner had the enemy assaults weakened than Reinhardt was ready with his riposte and flung in our last remaining panzers with the SS riding on their outsides. The enemy began to crumble and give way and our attack showed promise of brilliant success. But before we could consolidate our victory Corps ordered us to break off the operation and to prepare for a mission in the Bzura sector. In the battle which developed the Posnan army was destroyed, but it was an operation in which I had no part. Orders had recalled me to Berlin to take up a new appointment. To conclude, I think it can be claimed with justification that 4th Panzer played the major part in the destruction of the Posnan Army which led, in turn, to the defeat of the Polish forces in the autumn campaign of 1939.'

## BITTER RESISTANCE

As the *Blitzkrieg* unrolled the thrusting panzer spearheads spread across the country, leaving behind groups of enemy troops who had been bypassed and were undefeated. Some of these were stragglers hoping to escape detection and captivity in order that they could return home and take up their former life. Other groups varied in size from battalions to brigades. As these fragments of the Polish Army made their way to places which they believed to be still in native hands, they encountered German rear units and when they did the fighting was always bitter and often hand-to-hand. There was no time for mercy or compassion. The Poles had no facilities to deal with prisoners and the Germans considered these men debouching suddenly from dense forest to be not soldiers but partisans who, if caught, were given summary punishment.

In view of the confusion that existed and the danger that was present behind the German front, it is surprising to learn that officer couriers drove about without escort. Such men may have considered that the risk was

acceptable; they may not have seen that they were taking a risk or, perhaps considered the German uniform they wore to be a sufficient protection, even in 'bandit'-infested areas. One officer who had been a courier was Max Hildenbrandt who, from the tone of his letter, was one of those who had not appreciated the dangers of driving about without an escort. That part of the narrative he wrote is glossed over almost as if it had not needed to be considered.

'The following account of the first patrol I led, is based upon the post-action report which I wrote at the time. It was standard practice in the German services that after each mission, from a patrol upwards, a report had to be written and submitted to the next highest military authority. These reports had to follow a certain pattern and had to be as detailed as a textbook on tactics. I have abbreviated the official version and taken out much that would not be interesting to your readers.

'The action opens in September 1939, about a week after hostilities had begun in Poland. It had been part of my duties from the first day of operations, to act as an officer courier carrying messages that could not be entrusted to the field telephone. In the role of courier I had driven between our battalion HQ and Division or even Corps, sometimes several times each day.

"One of the unpleasant features of the Polish campaign was the very high officer casualty rate which was suffered as a result of the activities of *franc tireurs*. These snipers were dressed in civilian clothes and were therefore in a good position to pick out officer targets. As a result of the high casualty rate I was ordered to rejoin the battalion which was in action at Przansnysz. I was at Divisional HQ when the message came ordering my return to battalion. I was aware from the operational maps of the huge gaps there were between many of our units and that, as a consequence, I would be unlikely to find food or fuel en route. Forewarned is forearmed and I loaded my Kubelwagen with extra drums of petrol, oil and rations and set out.

'The road to Mlava bore the marks of bitter and prolonged fighting. Houses, farms and outbuildings had been either severely damaged or else burned out. The road surface, which even in peace time must have been poor, was now pitted with so many holes that my car lurched from side to side. I was quite concerned whether the suspension would hold up under such treatment. A blown bridge forced me to divert off the road, a decision I soon regretted because the car was soon stuck in deep sand. It took hours to get it out and going again and as I did not wish to continue the journey in the dark I stayed overnight in a requisitioned flat. The next morning saw me on the road bright and early but it took me a long time to find battalion TAC HQ. By the time I reached it it was too late to set out for the Company positions. My sleep that night was less comfortable than the flat of the night

before. This time I was bedded down in a barn with TAC HQ below me in a cellar and a great many rats to share the accommodation in the barn.

'No I Company which I reached late in the following morning was in position west of Modlin with its right flank resting on the Vistula. From the high bank we had good observation along the length of the river. We ate well – mostly chicken – flocks of which were in every abandoned farm. I spent one day becoming accustomed to active service conditions and late in the afternoon of the second day an O Group was called. The CO briefed us that night. Our Company was to send out a fighting patrol which I was to lead. Shortly before 2000 hrs our guns opened a softening-up barrage and soon the whole village was alight. In the fading light and with the whole area obscured by smoke it was difficult to determine the Polish positions. Then it began to rain and we sat, waiting to begin the patrol, huddled in our slit trenches.

'A report from the Intelligence officer was that a deserter had come across and had said the morale of the Poles opposite us was low. Our artillery fire was very accurate and had unnerved a great many of the deserter's comrades. At 2200 hrs the CO gave us final orders. The main patrol was split up into four smaller groups. The intention was to fight our way to the other side of the village and then to return. Our artillery which was already firing a barrage would cease fire between 0430 and 0600 hrs – the time when we were expected to be fighting in the village. The duration of the patrol was 90 minutes.

'I went round the Company positions talking to my men and climbed back into my own trench convinced that the cold and the noise would stop me sleeping. How wrong I was. At 0355 hrs an NCO woke me and we moved to where the men were already waiting. The whole patrol made its way through the outpost line and then split up. Each group carried a light machine-gun. One group member was the scout and another was the get-away man in the rear. Once in the open we jog-trotted across the ground but in the dawn light the Poles saw us and opened fire. So much for the barrage softening up the enemy. We grouped in a fold of dead ground and then charged through the village firing as we ran. It is strange what the mind absorbs at such times. I remember seeing to our right the Vistula shining in the growing daylight. To the left was a narrow cutting with a white house on one side of it. The cutting led to a village which I could not see. The walls of the cutting were about 8 or 9 metres high and were very steep. The patrol moved forward hugging one side of the cutting wall and when bursts of machine-gun fire tore into the sand wall we leapt across to the other side and flung ourselves down. There was a sudden explosion just in front of us and somebody cried out. I needed to regroup the patrol and pulled back my little group to the protection of the white house. I had a look at the wounded man

who had been hit in the chest by hand-grenade fragments. Another man had had his cheek cut by a splinter.

'An NCO and two men who had been sent to climb the cutting wall met opposition and then the sound of firing was heard on the right flank. One of the three men came back and reported that a trench on top of the cutting was filled with Polish soldiers. I gave orders for the other two men to pull back. The first man reached us safely but the other collapsed suddenly. An NCO took one look and reported that the dead man had been shot through the head. We dragged the body into cover and sent the wounded man back alone. There was no one whom we could spare to accompany him.

'We then came under direct fire from the house and I gave orders that we were to pull back. As we withdrew one of the men cried out and reached out a hand to me. It was wet with blood. Then the man on my right was shot through the calf, fell down and tried to drag himself through the sand on his stomach. Two of us went to help him and one of the NCOs carried him in the fireman's lift the whole time under fire. We finally reached cover where we lay down to gain our breath. After a short pause we moved back to the outpost line where our comrades came out to help carry the wounded. It was by now 0600 hrs.

'While I was in the outpost line three men were spotted bringing in a fourth, dragging him slowly up the steep bank and all the time under fire. These were the survivors of the fourth group of the fighting patrol. The group leader had been killed and his body was hanging on the Polish wire. Two other group members had been wounded. One of them, the man who had been dragged up the river bank, had been shot in the stomach while the other had been wounded in the upper arm as he flung hand-grenades into the enemy trenches.

'The battalion commander arrived at Company HQ at about noon. From post-action reports it was clear that the village was held in strength and that the Poles were not demoralized, as the deserter had said, but had shown themselves determined to resist and had fought well. In the evening, as I was writing the post-action report, two NCOs came to see me and told me that they intended to bring in the body of their comrade which was hanging on the wire. The dead man was only 30 metres from the Polish trenches and although it was a risky business they succeeded and in the course of their action shot up the enemy trenches and showered the Poles with hand-grenades. The campaign in Poland was made up of such incidents and had been, so I thought, filled with violent action. From experiences in later campaigns I was to learn that this had been an easy patrol.'

## BATTLESHIP *SCHLESWIG HOLSTEIN*

The Kriegsmarine had only a very minor role to play in the campaign against Poland although, of course, U-boats and commerce raiders, notably *Graf Spee*, were already at war station in the oceans of the world before war broke out. The Kriegsmarine's small role was due to the fact that Poland's outlet to the Baltic Sea was only a narrow strip of land; the Polish Corridor. It was the task of the German Navy to shell that narrow strip of land and then to disembark troops who would go on to occupy it.

The battleship *Schleswig Holstein*, a veteran of Jutland in the First World War, was the major naval unit that carried out the bombardments. She went into action very soon after the opening of the Polish campaign, shelling various targets, chiefly, the Westerplatte, in the estuary of the Vistula. Danzig, the chief city in the region, fell on 8 September, leaving *Schleswig Holstein* and her escorts free to move up to Gdingen, the Polish naval base. That city was not so easily taken and did not surrender until 20 September by which time the land campaign had all but ended.

Only the first paragraphs of Albert Richter's account of his life as a sailor described the Polish campaign and those paragraphs dealt with the bombardment of Westerplatte.

'Our ship, the *Schleswig Holstein*, was an old ship of the line, and carried 28cm guns as main armament and 15cm guns as secondary armament. We reached the mouth of the Vistula and took up position opposite the Westerplatte. Our main armament had a range of more than 10km, but we were anchored little more than a kilometre from our target; the Polish fortress on the Westerplatte.

'Our ship opened fire just after dawn. It was an unusual feeling to fire our guns in a war situation. When the 28s opened up the whole ship shook and she rolled a bit. We were firing at such a close range and at such a large target that each of our shells was a direct hit. I was below decks on a fire control point and could see nothing of the effects of our gunfire, but at intervals an officer gave us details. He told us of vast explosions as our shells exploded, of debris flying about and of the destruction that was being caused. After a ten-minute barrage it was time for the infantry assault company to carry out their landing. We wished them luck as they passed us, burdened down with flame-throwers and weapons. Their first assault was driven back by determined resistance and it was clear that the Poles were not yet "softened up". We opened fire again but still the Poles would not surrender and Stukas had to be brought in. They had as little success as our ship's artillery had had. The infantry company suffered so many casualties that a detachment of assault engineers had to be brought in to fill the ranks. At last, on 8th September, the Poles gave up the fight.'



## VICTORY

Although the major land battles were over by 19 September, Polish resistance at Gdingen lasted a day longer. Within a week the remnant of the Polish Army were being rounded up and marched to prisoner-of-war compounds – both German and Russian, after which the German Army held a Victory Parade through Warsaw, through streets which held no people as R. Holder recalled. ‘It may well have been the Poles had no wish to view our triumph but it could also have been that they were ordered to keep away. It was an eerie sensation to march through streets that are empty and which should be filled with people.’

With Poland smashed in a matter of weeks, Hitler had no worry about his eastern flank. The pact with Russia had cleared his back. Now he could concentrate on winning the war in the west. He would open a new land campaign and bring the overwhelming mass of the Luftwaffe and the army against the Franco-British enemies. He had intended to open the new war during the autumn of 1939, but his demand was turned down by OKW, whose leaders pointed out that the dry weather needed for a successful campaign was nearly at an end and would give way to winter, during which no major military operation could be begun and completed. The Führer was forced to postpone his strike in the west until spring, but before he could open Operation ‘Yellow’, a crisis on Germany’s northern flank could only be resolved by a new campaign against Denmark and Norway: Operations ‘Weser’ and ‘Weser North’.

# The War in Western Europe, 1940

## DESTINATION SCANDINAVIA

There were two overriding reasons for the German attack upon Norway in the spring of 1940: The first was economic, the second strategic. The economic reason was Germany's dependence upon Swedish iron-ore which was shipped out through the Norwegian port of Narvik. That ore was essential to meet Germany's armaments production; native supplies alone could not meet the demand. Germany depended upon foreign supplies and that flow was jeopardized by the Royal Navy's seizure of ore ships inside Norwegian territorial waters. Hitler demanded measures to counter this British action although he was well aware that the German Navy was too weak to protect the traffic between Narvik and German ports. The only way to ensure that the ore flow was uninterrupted would be for Germany to invade Norway. Thereby she could control both production and shipment. That imperative would have been reason enough, but in addition Hitler feared that Britain and France would pre-empt his own aggression. Such an act by the Western Allies would outflank Germany in the north. Hitler's fear of an Allied strategic move in Scandinavia was the second of the reasons for the German invasion.

The reason for the attack upon Denmark was that her northernmost airfields and her harbours were needed as bases by the German forces which would invade southern Norway. All the strategic objectives in Denmark were to be taken within an hour by two airborne assaults behind which would come conventional forces to occupy the country. The attack upon Norway, being both sea and airborne, would take longer to complete but was planned so that the capture of the principal objectives would be completed within a matter of hours. The OKW plan was for a double operation Exercise 'Weser' (the occupation of Denmark) and its extension Exercise 'Weser North' (the occupation of Norway). The German High Command plan was based on the fact that the military forces for the two Operations did not need to be vast, for no real military opposition was anticipated from either Scandinavian army. D-Day for both operations was to be 9 April. In order to meet that deadline certain slow-moving tanker and supply ships left German ports in advance of D-Day so as to be in position to refuel the vessels of the attack force as they arrived to carry out the invasion.

When D-Day came the occupation of Denmark was carried out according to plan, but the attack upon Norway suffered certain setbacks which will be described below. To begin with, however, the campaign opened with two successful airborne operations. No 3 Company of 1st Fallschirmjaeger Battalion dropped over the Stavanger/Sala airfield while Captain Walther's battalion HQ and No 2 Company were airlanded on Oslo/Fornehu aerodrome. These assault detachments were followed by other lightly armed paratroops who were brought in by a stream of transport machines. Then the first ship convoy arrived carrying, principally, heavily armed infantry, because the immediate need was to occupy Oslo in force. Tanks, guns and other bulky equipment came in subsequent, follow-up convoys.

German units, airborne and seaborne, invaded other harbour towns of southern Norway; Trondheim, Bergen, Stavanger and Egersund. The Kriegsmarine's all-out effort in 'Weser North' was carried out by eleven groups of ships which was the minimum number required to undertake all the seaborne assaults and escort duties on D-Day. More important than the objectives in the south of Norway was the town of Narvik, in the far north of the country. The need to occupy the ore-shipping port before the anticipated Franco-British assault posed a number of complex problems. North/south road and rail communications in Norway were too poor to allow the speedy movement of large bodies of troops to the battle areas. Nor were there suitable airfields in the Narvik region on to which transport machines could land. The OKW solution was to send a convoy of fast destroyers racing to the port. It is the No 1 Destroyer Group, under the command of Commodore Bonte, sailing northwards toward Narvik, and the subsequent fighting around that place which is of special interest to this book. ' . . . To begin with there were fourteen destroyers each of which carried about 200 of us Gebirgsjaeger and our equipment . . . The embarkation port was Wesermünde.' (L. Schumann)

The two destroyer groups, 'Narvik' and 'Trondheim', left their berths at 2300 hrs on the night of 6/7 April and at 0300 hrs on the following morning the ten 'Narvik' ships concentrated around the battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* which were to escort them. The remaining four destroyers were grouped around their escort, the cruiser *Admiral Hipper*. The armada set out at 0510 hrs and had soon passed the narrows between the Norwegian coast and the Shetlands, a sea area patrolled by the Royal Navy. Emil Hammer was a seaman with the 'Narvik' group. He recalled:

'The night of 7/8th April was pitch black. It was raining and the wind force rose from 7 to 8. Thanks to those appalling conditions we passed the Bergen-Shetlands narrows without being intercepted. The seas, whipped up by the wind, forced the convoy to reduce speed to 22 knots. This meant that we were late arriving in the objective area. During the early hours of 8th

April, there was an engagement between HMS *Glowworm* and the *Hipper*, as a result of which the British ship was sunk. Later that night the two German convoys parted. We maintained course for Narvik, led by the *Wilhelm Heidekamp*, the Command ship, while the other flotilla made for Trondheim. During the evening of the 8th the heavy units parted company from us in the destroyer group and took station west of Lofoten. They were to cover our back while we steamed towards Narvik. Any attack by the British Navy would almost certainly come from the south-west and would find our two battleships waiting.'

## LANDING AT NARVIK

The men carried in the destroyers were part of General Dietl's 3rd Gebirgs Division. One of these was Franz Puechler, a rifleman in a Jaeger regiment. Among the documents which came to me was the photostat of a letter which Franz had sent to his family in the Austrian Bundesland of Steiermark. Rifleman Puechler fell in action in his native province during the last days of the war. In the account quoted below and written after the campaign in Norway had ended, Puechler recalled the voyage to Narvik and the first day of battle.

'Let me now give you my impressions of the first part of the Norwegian campaign. We, that is the army units, left northern Germany by ship. Before we boarded our vessel, a destroyer, our CO gave us a short talk letting us know what tasks lay ahead of us. Then we climbed up the steep gangway, took off our kit and went below deck. Because there is so little space on board a warship we left it to the sailors to stow away our kit for they knew where to stack it. We washed, were given a meal and then afterwards chatted for a long time about the new campaign.

'The ship's crew treated us well and we landlubbers had complete trust in them. At about midnight we turned in, tired after the long day's journey. At reveille, the naval equivalent of the orderly sergeant (I do not know what he is called in naval terms) woke us. Although the ship was fitted with ventilators the close conditions had given most of us headaches. When we went up on deck we found that we were already on the high seas. It was a splendid sight to see a long line of twelve ships positioned on one side of us driving through a calm, bright, sunlit sea. But we were not to enjoy the pleasure of a calm sea for very long. A wind blew up and soon high waves rocked our ship. Together with several of my mates I lay down on the deck so that I would be less affected by seasickness. A number of other men joined us and then a sailor told us that the best method was to sleep if we could. Soldiers can sleep anywhere, but soon we were wakened by the sound of our anti-aircraft guns in action against ten British bombers flying high overhead.

The aircraft dropped a few eggs but did not hit anything. Their attack lasted only a few minutes.

'By now it was getting dark. The sea was so rough that our quarters were in a terrible mess. Everything that was not nailed or screwed down had been flung about. At reveille next morning we were not as bright as we had been on the previous day. Our stomachs were still churning and heaving. Suddenly a British destroyer steamed over the horizon. Our ship's captain ordered "Action stations" and within a short time everybody was at their post. But then the destroyer could no longer be seen. Our heavy ships had opened fire and had sunk her. Only a handful of survivors could be rescued from the stormy waves. Our quarters were in an indescribable mess. Sleep was really out of the question but we managed to doze fitfully now and then. In time our ship's pitching and tossing lessened and a sailor told us we had left the high seas and had entered coastal waters.

'By the grey light of dawn we saw we were sailing along a fiord. The enemy was firing at us and our ships were returning that fire. Some distance from shore the ship halted and dropped anchor. We Gebirgsjaeger paraded on the upper deck, put on our equipment and climbed down into small craft which carried us towards the shore. It was a marvellous feeling to have firm ground under our feet again. Once we had disembarked we went immediately into action, fighting in a blinding snowstorm. There was a lot of gunfire from the shore which was answered by our ships and the noise of the explosions echoed around the fiord. We made our way over every type of obstacle, natural as well as artificial and by midday had worked our way close to the coastal guns which were our objective. One of my mates said to me "Do you see that barracks: We'll be in there tonight." He was right. After hours of fighting we could report to Berlin that our mission had been accomplished.'

## BATTLES IN THE FIORD

By 0810 hrs on 9 April, the German Admiralty communiqué could report that Dietl and his men were in control of Narvik town and the light railway along which the iron-ore was freighted. That communiqué was technically correct, but neither the area nor the railway line were firmly in German hands. There were to be hard and wasteful land and sea battles fought in the Narvik area. The naval engagements were over within a matter of days, but on land the Gebirgsjaeger and sailors fought for months, because terrain conditions dictated that this campaign could not be a *Blitzkrieg*.

On D-Day morning, so far as Bonte and his flotilla were concerned, their part in Operation 'Weser North' had been successfully completed. They had brought the Gebirgsjaeger to Narvik. The Kriegsmarine plan called for the group to be refuelled and then to return at top speed to Germany. A

speedy refuelling was out of the question. Although two fleet tankers had left German ports ahead of the destroyers, so as to be in position when those ships needed to refuel, only one, the *Jan Weddlem*, made the rendezvous. The other, *Kattegat*, had been sunk. Its loss meant that now only two destroyers and not four, could be refuelled simultaneously and refuelling took seven hours to complete. Because the German Admiralty timetable could not be kept the destroyer group was still in the Narvik area when the ships of the Royal Navy came on the scene. A former officer of the Kriegsmarine wrote the following account of the first naval battles which were fought out in Narvik Fiord.

‘The Gebirgsjaeger whom we had brought to Narvik were disembarked and we in the destroyer flotilla awaited orders to return to Germany. We were never to make that journey home in the ships which we had brought to Narvik. In the early hours of the morning of 10th April, a British destroyer flotilla of five vessels, entered the fiord and under cover of a snowstorm reached the entrance to Narvik harbour without being detected. They opened fire with guns and torpedoes upon shipping in the harbour, but they did not know that part of our destroyer group was anchored in nearby fiords to the north and south of the town. Those ships came immediately to our aid and the British were caught between two fires. Very soon three enemy destroyers had been sunk and another badly damaged. The fifth vessel made off westward at high speed. The enemy flotilla commander, flying his flag in HMS *Hardy*, was killed in this action.

‘We, too, had suffered losses. Not long after the alarm bells called us to action stations, our flotilla leader was torpedoed. We lost a great many comrades, including Commodore Bonte, whose vessel was sunk. Then our ship was struck by a torpedo but we managed to lay her alongside a Swedish vessel and this stopped her from sinking.’

That action was the first of a series of destroyer engagements fought out over the following four days in and around Narvik Fiord. When these battles ended the German flotilla had been totally destroyed, a disastrous blow because, as a result, the destroyer strength of the German Navy was halved. In addition, in southern Norway, the cruiser *Blücher* had been sunk and other major units had been badly damaged. The German Navy’s losses were to have their effect upon the course of future operations; in particular the plan to invade Great Britain. The narrative continued.

‘From an inspection of the ship made after the battle, it was clear that the damage we had suffered could not be repaired locally. We could not leave Narvik and so we removed material which could be used in the defence of the town. We sailors now had no ships but we could play a part as gunners, or if it came to it, as infantrymen. A couple of hours after laying alongside the Swedish vessel we had removed hand weapons and ammunition as well as light flak and a 3.7cm flak gun from our ship. This material was stored

in bombproof shelters by some crewmen while others worked on the defences in that area around the harbour which we had been allotted. The ground was covered with snow over a metre deep and we used this to camouflage our positions. We produced camouflage clothing from table cloths, bed sheets and other linen, and concealed machine-gun posts with the parachutes which had been fitted to air-dropped supplies.

'We spent three days in those positions standing-to each time the British ships returned, determined to fling back any attempts which they might make to land troops in Narvik. The enemy undertook no landing operation. We were joined in our defensive positions by the crews of other German destroyers who had fought to the last round and who had then blown up their ships. All the naval detachments were grouped and given tasks, such as defending the railway line, driving trucks or storing the supplies taken off ships in the area. It was clear that the Narvik garrison was isolated, that it could expect neither reinforcement nor supplies and that we had to make do with what we had. Our naval engineers soon had the railway working again, but Norwegian forces still held the last section of the line before it reached the Swedish border. Our engineers fitted steel plates as a form of primitive armour to the locomotive and that "armoured train" went into action with the Gebirgsjaeger. The last section of the line was captured from the Norwegians. Part of the naval infantry group not only fought in the mountains but went on patrol wearing skis. Some crews patrolled in small vessels to maintain contact with isolated outposts to the north and south of the town.

'During the following weeks British ships came up the fiord and bombarded us and we could make no reply to that aggression. We did have our victories, however, and extended the bridgehead perimeter. In time the general situation deteriorated and became very serious indeed. We were a long way from home and totally isolated. There was no airfield on to which supply transports could land and we were beyond the flying range of most of the Luftwaffe's machines so that an air drop was out of the question. Only when Trondheim and its airfield passed into German hands could we be supplied by air on a regular basis.

'It will be appreciated that there was no shelter for our men fighting in the mountains and that they lay out on the bare slopes without protection from the bitter wintry conditions. We sailors shared those privations with our army comrades. At the end of April, French and British pressure on the Gebirgsjaeger sector of the bridgehead drove it in and to thicken the line the naval infantry detachment was ordered forward. The memory of the terrible approach march to the forward positions will always remain with us. It had to be undertaken at night, firstly for reasons of concealment from the enemy and, secondly because the night temperature froze the knee-deep snow and made marching less tiring. The misery of the days and nights spent out in

the open, under constant fire, with no warm food and little sleep can only be truly appreciated by those who have had experience of such conditions. We lost more men from sickness than we did from the actual fighting, but we held out, beating off many enemy infantry assaults. On 26th May, under severe enemy pressure from three sides, we were forced to evacuate Narvik, but we did not let the enemy enter the town.

‘It was the news from France that robbed our opponents of their élan and they became less aggressive. At last the Luftwaffe was able to airdrop supplies and Gebirgsjaeger and paratroops were dropped as reinforcements to fill the gaps in the ranks. By the beginning of June the enemy realized that he could not take Narvik and his forces withdrew back to England. The strategically important iron-ore town of Narvik had been held by us – the navy and by Dietl’s Gebirgsjaeger. It was our victory.’

## THE SEIZURE OF TRONDHEIM

Another success was gained when a naval group seized Trondheim. This account of the voyage and action was written by two former Naval officers, Oberleutnant Grosser and Leutnant Schmokel.

“The ship is to be ready for sea by 0900 hrs tomorrow.” At last the order which we had been anticipating. Something was obviously afoot and next morning when we paraded on the after deck the Captain warned us, in his address, that hard fighting was to be expected. As soon as he had finished speaking we began to prepare. The ward room was cleared and space made to accommodate the soldiers whom we were to carry. Three train loads of them arrived and boarded the ships of our flotilla. After dark there was a communal dinner and then we sailed out heading northwards.

‘Next morning a wind force of between 7 and 8, brought heavy seas crashing over the bridge of our ship. Water flooded everywhere. For the soldiers it must have been a miserable experience. The bad weather also made for poor visibility but had the advantage that we were not spotted by British sea or air reconnaissance. We travelled at top speed and it seemed at first that our journey would be completed without incident. Then the bells rang for action stations. Six or seven heavy explosions shook the ship, probably aircraft bombs set to explode on impact. We were lucky, not one of them hit us.

‘The protective cover of darkness fell quickly. We were thankful because although we were keen to fight the British we were in no situation to do this loaded up as we were with troops and equipment. The whole of that night and half the following day we sailed without interference from the British, but late the following afternoon as we were nearing Trondheim, our objective, the flotilla leader wirelessly that he was in action against a British



destroyer. We were ordered forward in support. "Clear the decks for action!", was not an easy task with our extra burden of men, but soon they were safely below the armoured deck while we sailors prepared for battle. The soldiers were able to follow its course by the commentary relayed over the Tannoy, as well as by the sound of our guns firing and noise of the enemy shells exploding in the sea. When the British saw our ship it was obvious they thought us to be one of their own cruisers. We soon put them right and salvo after salvo struck them. The enemy was not beaten easily and fired a number of torpedoes forcing us to take such strong evasive action that our ship heeled hard over for a time. But soon it was the British vessel which was lying on its side with its weapons silent. Our guns ceased firing and we set about rescuing the enemy sailors of whom about forty were taken from the freezing waters.

'It had been a good day for us so far but we still had ahead of us the passage up the Trondheim Fiord and the landing of the troops we carried. We knew that the entrance to the fiord was only a few hundred metres wide and that it was protected by heavy gun batteries. We would have to run the gauntlet in the dark but we were determined, if fired upon, to give the Norwegians as good as we got. In the dark night of 9th April, we took up formation with our destroyers in line astern of us. Our group moved slowly and silently, completely blacked out through pitch darkness towards the guns. Then the order came "Full speed ahead!" and simultaneously the challenge from a Norwegian patrol vessel. "What is your name?" There was a long silence before we slowly sent the word "Mustard". What we had to do was to gain time; twenty minutes at least. The Norwegians, as we had hoped, did not understand our signal and asked us to repeat it.

'By the time we had sent off the false name a second time we had rounded the dangerous point only to be caught in the beams of land-based searchlights. We shone our own searchlights at the enemy blinding them completely. Then the enemy guns opened up but the ship's armament dominated them and we passed without being hit. We had done it; we had passed through. A little way past the batteries some of our destroyers disembarked soldiers whose task it was to capture the guns to use against the British when they try to land.

'Soon we had arrived in Trondheim harbour and dropped anchor. The army units began to disembark. The town looked peaceful in the early morning light. Very soon we received word that our soldiers had occupied the town's strategic points. The mission had been successfully concluded; Trondheim had been reached and taken.'

## THE SINKING OF *BLÜCHER*

On that first morning of Operation 'Weser North', the Kriegsmarine suffered a grievous blow. The OKW communiqué dated 10 April, admitted that the cruiser *Blücher*, had been sunk on the previous day and told how she had replied to the fire of Norwegian coastal batteries. The communiqué continued, '... our ship's armament silenced the enemy battery but *Blücher* had been hit several times and badly damaged. The ship then steamed into a minefield and was lost ...'

One of the soldiers aboard *Blücher* wrote an account which was published, first by his unit and, subsequently, in an armed forces yearbook. A photostat of the article was enclosed in a covering letter sent by E. Hauber, who wrote, '... As a young boy during the war, I read the accounts of what our men were doing, with pride and pleasure. The enclosed story was a particular favourite of mine.'

'The fight and end of the cruiser *Blücher*, by one who was there.

'Although the night is pitch-black, we soldiers shipped on the cruiser *Blücher* knew we had passed the Kattegat and were somewhere near Oslo Fiord. The crew is at action stations but like most of my army comrades I find it impossible to sleep. Standing on deck as *Blücher* enters the fiord we can just make out to the left and right of us sparse forested, snow-covered mountains ... As our eyes become accustomed to the darkness we can see how narrow the fiord is and how close is the land on both sides of the ship. Slowly and completely blacked out, *Blücher* sails into the fiord. It is about midnight. Action stations is sounded. We soldiers are ordered below decks where we can do nothing but wait.'

Seamen who are trained to fight sea battles can submerge their natural fears by concentrating upon the duties for which they have been trained. Consider, however, the feelings of soldiers en route to fight and who are confined in the cramped and unfamiliar interior of a warship, particularly when that ship has to fight a sea battle. Unaware of what is happening, interpreting or often misinterpreting, every noise and each detonation, soldiers have no task upon which they can fasten their mind. No duty upon which they can turn their full concentration. They must wait until the sailors have won the battle or until the order comes that allows them to leave the dank and echoing vessel in which they have been transported.

Such were the experiences shared by many soldiers who fought in the Norwegian campaign. The opening stages of that operation afforded one of the rare opportunities for the German Army to be shipped overseas to fight, because the German soldier's usual theatre of operations was the continental land mass. For Operation 'Weser North' the German soldiers brought to battle by sea, were not carried in troopships, but in warships, vessels neither

built to carry large bodies of troops nor designed for comfort. That was the situation which faced the soldiers sailing in *Blücher* and the story continues:

‘Presently a sailor comes down and tells us that shore searchlights have caught *Blücher* in their beams. From what he says it seems we shall not be able to slink past the Norwegian defences undetected. There is a terrible crash and the whole vessel shakes. “That’s it,” said our officer. “Move to a lower deck, lads.” He has hardly spoken when another frightful crash comes from the rear part of the ship and the steel plates on which we are standing vibrate alarmingly. “It must be our guns in action,” says someone. We feel that *Blücher* must be returning the fire from the coastal battery. There is a fresh detonation, then another; the first one weaker, the second much louder. *Blücher* shudders alarmingly. The distant noises die away. Perhaps the enemy battery has ceased firing.

‘But it is clear that *Blücher* has been hit. A mine, perhaps, or a torpedo. We do not know which. The ship slowly heels over and more slowly rights herself. Sailors bring down wounded men and lay them on scrambling nets. There is a constant metallic rolling and rumbling. Near us ammunition hoists are working so *Blücher* must still be action. The sailors moving the ammunition are sweating hard. “What’s happening?” I ask one of them, but he is too busy to give me an answer. Once again *Blücher* heels over, but this time does not come upright again. Suddenly I am aware that the pulse of the ship has stopped. There is no gentle vibration of engines. I have the feeling that *Blücher* fought until the last heart beat.

‘The group I am with is made up of fifty soldiers. We are unafraid although none of us has ever been in this situation, standing deep down in the bowels of a warship during a battle. A voice cries, “Fire!” and a sailor rushes toward the cry carrying an extinguisher in his hand. The fire must be aft of us because it is some time before smoke reaches our area. “Everybody on deck!” comes the order. Things must be serious, but there is no panic. Daylight floods through a hole in the side of the ship. It comes as a shock to realize that it is daytime; just before six in the morning. We breathe in the fresh morning air. Land seems to be near, just beyond our fingertips. We clamber along the sloping deck and see that *Blücher* has heeled so far over that her port side is only about two metres above the sea’s surface. Men come out of the forward part of the ship and group themselves along the starboard railings. The rear of the ship is burning fiercely. Thick clouds of smoke rise vertically into the air and spread over the fiord.

‘We are not left long without orders. There is a group of small islands not far from us and our officer tells us that boats and liferafts will take us off the ship to one of the islands. There is an alarming, sharp whishing sound. Torpedoes are being fired off, so that they will not explode when the fire reaches them. Because of the angle of the ship the tubes lie almost vertical and as the torpedoes are fired they fly through the air before falling back into

the water of the fiord, then surface and run to explode harmlessly two hundred metres away against the rocks of the fiord. We are told to undo our belts and to take off our overcoats and boots. A violet signal lamp on the top mast flickers and some way away down the fiord comes an answering signal. "The boats are coming to rescue us," someone says. We slide slowly down the deck to the port side of the ship and find sailors launching rubber boats and rafts. Everybody lends a hand and the task runs as smoothly as if we are on manoeuvres.

'The rubber boats fill with men. I lose my footing as I try to get into the craft and fall into the icy cold waters of the fiord. Although it is only a short row to the shore I am soon frozen through and my whole body shakes with the cold. As we paddle I turn round and see *Blücher*, now nothing more than a burning wreck. We land on one of the little islands, find a small summer house and soon the two rooms are filled with soldiers. I take off my wet clothes and massage warmth into my body. Some time later I leave the hut and go down to the shore where I witness the tragic spectacle of *Blücher* going down. The colossus which had been lying still in the water suddenly turns. Her bows dip, her stern rises sheer out of the water, turns slightly and then *Blücher* disappears into the deep.

'A chain of boats sets out to rescue the men in the water and to bring them back to our little island. Nobody says much. The loss of our lovely ship has affected us all but our officers soon have us organized. A fire is lit to dry wet clothing and the morning passes. In the afternoon the Luftwaffe comes. First one plane, and then a squadron and then still more. The islands on which the Norwegian guns are situated are bombed from the air. The fort begins to burn. We wave cloths, pants, handkerchiefs, anything to let the flyers know where we are marooned.

'During the afternoon a Norwegian coastguard vessel approaches the island. One of our officers gives us permission to board the enemy vessel and be taken as prisoners of war to Oslo, if we wish, but no one takes advantage of that offer. Help from our own side cannot be far off. On the shore a great fire has been lit around which men are cooking the fish which were killed by the explosion of the torpedoes that morning. On the roof of the little house a sailor has written in white paint the one word "Food", to let the airmen who fly at low level above us know what we need most. Another sailor has painted a red swastika on a white shirt. Anything to attract attention.

'Then the first German rescue ships arrive. We are saved. A motor boat ferries the groups from the shore to the waiting ships. On board we are given warm soup, eggs and grog after which we go to sleep. Well, we may have suffered a heavy loss in the sinking of the *Blücher*, but Oslo has been taken and when we wake from our sleep we learn that the most important places in Norway are in German hands. We have gained a splendid victory.'

## ARMY ENGINEERS

The impression given to the German public at large and cultivated by the media, that the campaign in Norway had been fought and won largely as a result of the navy's self-sacrifice and by the heroism of Dietl and his men, annoyed many others who had served in the campaign. This selective emphasis by the Propaganda Ministry was used very often during the Second World War and each time it caused bitterness and resentment among those servicemen who were not named in the newspapers or on the wireless. It seemed to them that their efforts, their skill and their heroism were ignored in favour of a preferred minority.

Emil Grohl was in the engineers and saw action in an infantry division. He wrote in, not to describe an incident during the campaigns in which he had fought, but to suggest that the role of the army engineers in Exercise 'Weser North', had not been fully appreciated.

'The Engineers had a particularly difficult time during the Scandinavian campaign and the High Command must have been aware of the need for a higher than normal ratio of engineering troops in the campaign, because the War Establishment included not only field but also mountain and railway engineering companies. The speed of the campaign and the nature of the terrain meant that there was little mine laying or clearing, but there was a great amount of bridge building, constructing ones which were able to bear heavy vehicles. We also laid corduroy roads across swamps and muddy areas and carried out demolitions. Field companies were used principally on road works, improving surfaces to make them suitable for wheeled and tracked vehicles. Or, more usually, making roads where none had existed before, because in northern Norway roads were often little more than tracks. Those tracks had been adequate for peace-time civilian use, but for the movement of military vehicles, proper roads were required.'

It was the traditional role of German Army engineers to spearhead infantry attacks with explosive charges or close-quarter weapons such as flame-throwers. Emil Grohl remarked that there was little need for such specialized engineer activity in the Norwegian campaign. 'The terrain did not allow the use of major military formations. Most operations were carried out at regimental or even battalion level. For such missions there was enough infantry strength so that we engineers were not often called upon to act as assault infantry in the campaign.'

## AFTERMATH

To conclude the accounts of Operation 'Weser-North', the final paragraphs of Franz Puechler's letter describes events after the fighting had ended.

'The countryside around here is very much like home. On both sides of the fiord the mountains, covered with ice and snow, rise sheer out of the water. We are so far north that the nights here are never completely black and the darkest part of the night lasts only an hour or two. Now that the campaign is over we have a lot of free time in which we go sailing. Mail is coming through quite regularly and we have a radio set. We get on well with the local population and there is plenty in the shops to buy, so we are quite content.

'A few days ago our company commander read out an Order of the Day that the Führer had awarded us a special decoration for the Narvik operation. This is to be in the shape of a shield bearing the name "Narvik", an edelweiss, an anchor and a propeller, with the date "1940". This decoration will be worn on the left upper arm. It is rumoured that our commander, General Dietl, will make the presentations himself, but I cannot believe that he will hand the shield out to every man in the division. I think he will make personal presentations to just representatives from each company or battalion of the division.'

It was mentioned in the destroyer officer's account that the British and French efforts to take Narvik lessened as a result of the campaign in France. This new war had opened in the second week of May and within days the *Blitzkrieg* had had disastrous effects upon the armies of the Western Allies. The military forces of Holland, Belgium and France were all subjugated in a series of swift operations and the British Expeditionary Force was forced to withdraw from the mainland of Europe. By the end of June 1940, Hitler was master of Europe.

## OPERATION 'YELLOW'

As we have seen from the preceding section it had been Hitler's intention to open the war in the west immediately after the conclusion of the campaign in Poland. The differences in opinion between the Supreme Commander and Army High Command on the future conduct of the war, can be seen as early as 17 September 1939, when von Brauchitsch issued orders for the forces in the west to go over to a defensive posture.

The OKH rejection of Hitler's demand for quick action against the powerful Western Allies, was a logical decision. The Polish campaign, although brief, had disclosed certain tactical weaknesses and faults in equipment. These would have to be corrected before the Wehrmacht could with confidence launch a new campaign. Nor was it possible to carry out a change of fronts with the speed which Hitler demanded. He had no idea of the difficulties and complexities of such a major operation. OKH not only

over-estimated French and British strength but was firmly against an escalation of a continental war into a world-wide conflict.

On 9 October, less than three weeks after the OKH memorandum, Hitler laid out his plans for the 'Conduct of the War in the West'. In this document, addressed to the Supreme Commanders of the fighting services, he stressed the successes which had been achieved by the Luftwaffe and the panzer arm which, as assault weapons had '... reached a level not attained by any other State ...' He followed this memorandum with Directive No 6 which included the sentence, 'Thus I am resolved ... to be active and aggressive ...' Despite this intention the army chiefs knew that campaigning weather would not return until the end of April, by which time the relocation of formations, improvements in tactics and troop retraining would have begun and been completed. In his determination to control events Hitler ordered and cancelled the date of D-Day for the opening of the war in the west no fewer than twenty-nine times; moves which the Allies considered were part of a war of nerves.

A serious decision faced the planning staffs at both OKW and OKH. This was whether the strike in the west should be made along the traditional northern route or whether it should come via some other east/west thrust line. In the case of the first the German right-wing armies would advance across Holland and Belgium before changing direction and wheeling southwards to confront the Anglo-French armies. The German senior military commanders were all veterans of the Great War, as indeed was Hitler himself. Like him they had endured the years of stalemate produced by trench warfare and the efforts to break the military deadlock through large-scale and bloody offensives. They sought to avoid a war of attrition, aware as they were that Germany's manpower and material resources were insufficient to sustain a long and wasteful conflict. In that they were in accord with Hitler who intended to prosecute the whole war as a series of swift, decisive and victorious campaigns after each of which his forces could be re-equipped, reinforced and trained to fight a new enemy and to gain the next success on the road to total victory.

In view of Hitler's demands, a northern strike would not gain the quick victory over France which was required. A new route would have to be found through which France could be struck down swiftly – but where was such a route to be found? It was clear, even in the early planning stages, that Hitler rejected outright a re-run of the Schlieffen Plan, that is to say the northern route through Holland, Belgium and northern France. As early as the beginning of November the Führer was insisting upon a reinforcement of the mobile formations which would thrust towards Sedan. By the end of that month he was convinced that '... the planned attack in the west would be the greatest victory in the history of the world ...' From the middle of January planning was concentrated upon a military decision being reached

as the result of a break-through in southern Belgium. The choice of that region was due to the fact that the alternatives to a northward attack were westward thrusts, either out of the Mosel valley or else through the Belfort Gap. But France had constructed along her eastern frontier a modern system of fortifications, the Maginot Line. The Great War had demonstrated the strength of even simply constructed field fortification and how costly in casualties it was to take trenches in the face of a determined defence. The OKH planners, aware of the strength and depth of the concreted defences of the Maginot Line, must have felt that the German Army would bleed to death if it attempted to force that line. Those permanent defences, which ran from Switzerland to the French Ardennes, thus ruled out any attack against central or southern France.

There was, however, one gap along her eastern frontier through which France could be invaded. The Maginot Line ended in the French Ardennes and there were no strong defensive positions in the Belgian Ardennes. Contemporary military opinion considered that the region, one of high wooded hills and lacking an adequate road or rail network, was unsuitable for the passage of a modern army. It was that Allied miscalculation which was exploited by the German High Command.

Hitler as Supreme Commander was able to force through his ideas on the battle plan and OKH issued an order in November 1939, that the concentration of mobile formations, ' . . . at or to the south-east of Sedan [were] to gain the west bank of the Maas so as to create favourable conditions for the continuation of the operation . . .' Concurrent with Hitler's own intention was the thinking of von Manstein, Chief of Staff of the Army, which agreed in broad outline with the Führer's proposals. ' . . . the mobile formations . . . must pass to the south of Liège [and drive] towards Arras and Boulogne. Thereby [those forces] which the enemy puts into Belgium will not be attacked frontally . . . but will be cut off from the Somme. The southern wing must also be strong enough to fend off any French counter-attack against its left flank, so that the thrust to the coast can be completed . . . '

OKH remained unconvinced of the potential of von Manstein's plan. Then, on 17 March, he was ordered to report to Hitler and when asked by the Führer for his assessment of the situation described his idea in detail. At the end of the briefing Hitler had decided on von Manstein's plan, the most important part of which was the creation of an armoured fist; von Kleist's Panzer Group. This would provide the impetus for the thrust to the Channel ports as well as providing the flank guard against French attacks coming from south of the Somme. The Panzergruppe was composed of Reinhardt's 41 Panzer Corps on the right and Guderian's 19 Panzer Corps on the left with von Wietersheim's 14 Motorized Corps, the follow-up troops, ready to reinforce a successful thrust by either wing. To protect the northern, i.e.,



right, flank of the Panzer Group, was Hoth's 15th Panzer Corps, while farther north was Hoepner's 16 Panzer Corps and on its right wing, 9th Panzer Division serving with Eighteenth Army in Holland.

Von Manstein anticipated that the Allied reaction to a German attack through Holland and Belgium would be to advance their first line armies into the Low Countries. When that happened their back would be protected only by second-rate French troops against whom von Kleist's panzer fist must prevail. When the French broke and the panzer mass extended across northern France the Allied armies would be split and could be destroyed in detail. Those in Belgium and in northern France would be crushed first. Then would come the strike across the Somme to drive back the French armies positioned there on to the guns of Army Group 'C'.

Long before D-Day for the operation, 10 May 1940, the armies that were to carry out the assault were positioned and ready. Thanks to Germany's excellent rail and road network the whole force was echeloned in depth, a situation which not only hid the build-up from the Allies but also helped to confuse them as to where the German point of maximum effort would be. Those excellent road and rail systems did not exist in the steep, wooded hills of the Belgian Ardennes. That region was poorly served and it was expected that there would be difficulties in passing formations through the areas as well as maintaining supplies and follow-up troops. Lieutenant-Colonel Graber of the Supply Service wrote: 'To facilitate movement three roads were given the status of "*Rollbahn*" or highway and these were reserved for the use, either exclusively or as required, of the panzer formations. Once the panzer columns were clear of the obstructive terrain of the Ardennes, they could use the first-class network of roads in northern France and in Belgium. That road system was so extensive that there was no need to operate a *Rollbahn* system west of the River Maas.'

It was a campaign which contained several innovative features: the use of gliders to capture strategic targets in Belgium; of paratroops and air-landed formations and, more importantly, the employment of tanks in the mass. No military plan, so it has been written, should extend beyond the initial clash of arms and, certainly, Operation 'Yellow', for all the planning and the daring innovations, could have failed. That it did not was due to the determination of junior leaders. The leadership at regimental level together with the freedom of action enjoyed by the senior commanders enabled the German Army to fight and to win the campaign. OKH left the control of operations in the field to the commanders on the spot, aware that only they could judge the situation as it existed at the time and not as it appeared to be when viewed from a distant headquarters hours later. Guderian recalled: 'I receive no further orders as to what I was to do once we had secured bridgeheads across the Maas. All my decisions [from that point on] until I

reached the Atlantic seaboard at Abbeville were taken by me and by me alone . . .'

Taking Guderian's panzer corps as a mark, his men had captured Bouillon by D-Day plus 2 and had gone on by last light of that day (12 May) to reach the eastern bank of the Maas. During the 13th the river was crossed and a barrier which the French had hoped to hold for a week went in a single day. *Blitzkrieg* was proving itself. It was helped in its early stages by the Nazi Party's deployment of its uniformed organizations. In Germany at that time there was not so strict an enforcement of the black out regulations as in the United Kingdom, and to aid the movement of troop convoys towards the frontier areas in preparation for D-Day, they were considerably relaxed as Rolf Steiner's letter shows:

'I had fought in the Great War and in 1940 was a member of the NSKK, the Nazi Party's Motorized Corps. It was in the first week of May that preliminary orders were issued from HQ in Bitburg to our unit. We were to parade on 9 May, and to bring with us rations for two days, our waterproof clothing, a torch and a map. Before we mobilized our officers had carried out a reconnaissance of the roads in our area. In the afternoon of the 9th, we paraded and were given a briefing. Small groups of us were to stand at each crossroads or road junction. We were given signs bearing large white letters and an arrow. Field telephone links were set up between each group and its local headquarters with more sophisticated links between local and higher HQs. We were told that what we were doing was a troop movement exercise which would last all night and probably well into the next day. Our most important task was to ensure that the motorized columns kept moving. Any vehicle that broke down was to be pushed to one side and kept there until a maintenance unit had been called for by telephone and got it running again.

'It was about 9 in the evening when the first column came along and I was surprised to see that they were driving on full headlights. The black out masks which were normally fitted had been removed and the headlights were blazing. The column – it was light armoured cars – drove past us at high speed. Then there was a telephone message telling us that there would not be another column for about an hour. We were to use the time as a meal break. At about 11.30 the telephone rang again ordering us back on duty – this time for lorried convoys which rushed past us non-stop until about 2 in the morning. We had no idea of where the convoys were going but thought they were doing a road test of driving skills. From 2.30 to 4 we had another break and it was already light when we left the inn where we had been eating our food. There was now no need for the vehicles to carry headlights, but we were still kept on duty to hold the lettered placards. Being old soldiers we soon worked out a roster, whereby some were on duty with the boards

while the others slept. It must have been about 8 in the morning when one of the group turned on the radio. After a fanfare of trumpets there was the announcement that the army had begun operations in Holland and Belgium. Our first thought was that we had been taking part in a deception plan with vehicles driving on full headlights to make the enemy believe that the attack was being made on our sector. Imagine our delight when we eventually realized that our actions had not been part of a deception plan but the actual assault.'

Steiner's unit had been only one of many in action during the night of 9/10 May. To the north lads of the Hitler Youth had helped to build bonfires which laid a pathway of fire across Westphalia to mark out the route for the glider-towing aircraft and the transports filled with Fallschirmjaeger heading westwards to objectives in Belgium and in Holland. The Ju 52 'mother' aircraft, towing the gliders filled with airborne men who were to take out Eben Emael and the bridges in the area, cast off their 'daughters' at a height of 3,000 metres and then turned for home so that the noise of their engines would not alarm the Belgians. The DFS gliders had more than 25 kilometres to cover to the target areas and descended slowly out of the night sky to touch down as planned and on time. The German Army's operations plan had been dependent upon the glider landings around Eben Emael. Now these had been accomplished and the divisions, corps and armies that had been waiting moved into action. The time was just before 0530 and Operation 'Yellow' had opened.

The great mass of Army Group 'A' debouched out of the Ardennes and headed towards its first main objective – the Maas. Earlier paragraphs have shown that Guderian's panzer corps virtually 'bounced' that river barrier and had begun its drive to the Channel. His 19 Corps [2nd, 1st and 10th Panzer Divisions] advanced with its left flank resting on first the Aisne and then the Somme. Von Kleist's panzer group separated the Allied armies as von Manstein had intended and although the Anglo-French force in the north was strong it could not defeat the panzer mass. The dynamic leadership from the front, which was a characteristic of *Blitzkrieg*, was superior to battle by consensus which was the Allied method. The Anglo-French forces in Belgium were either destroyed or were constricted into a perimeter around Dunkirk.

## OPERATION 'RED'

On 24 May, just as it seemed that the German armour was about to deliver the *coup de grâce* to the forces within the perimeter, Hitler ordered his armies to halt. Halder's caustic comment on Hitler's leadership throughout the battle is contained in the diary entries: '... The Führer is terribly nervous.

Frightened by his own success he is afraid . . . unaccountably [he] keeps worrying about the southern flank . . .' Not all the units investing the Dunkirk perimeter obeyed the Führer's 'Halt' order. The Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler did not and 'Sepp' Dietrich, its commander, was taken to task for this disobedience.

The British Expeditionary Force was taken off the Dunkirk beaches by the Royal Navy and the rearguard, mainly French in composition, fought on until it was overwhelmed. The Allied hosts in the north had been destroyed or scattered. Holland and Belgium had capitulated. The German Army, no longer with an enemy at its back, could regroup for the second part of the war in the west. This operation, code-named 'Red', also known as the 'Battle of France', opened on 5 June.

The divisions of the panzer group attacked along the whole line with various degrees of success, but then OKH set two panzer groups, von Kleist's and Guderian's, side by side and sent them striking southwards on each side of Reims. This massive blow smashed through the enemy resistance and when the first German motorized units reached the Swiss frontier on 17 June, the French Army overwhelmed in a fast battle of pursuit, just fragmented. An armistice, asked for on 18 June, was in operation by the 25th. What the might of Imperial Germany with decades of preparation, planning and husbanding of resources had not achieved in four years, the Wehrmacht of the Third Reich, with only six years of preparation, had accomplished in less than two months.

## BARRAGE ON THE WEYGAND LINE

One of the contributors to this book, Richard Stahlmann, who helped me with my book *Last Days of the Reich*, served as an anti-tank gunner in an infantry division and first saw action during the 1940 campaign in France. He wrote:

'It would seem that you favour an easy breaking in [of the soldier] to the privations of ground warfare. I do not think that is the right way. My own initiation was as easy as your own but it left me unprepared for the terrifying experience of Russia. The first part of the war in northern France had been concluded so quickly that my division did not enter the fighting. We marched a great deal and each night dug slit trenches and prepared our anti-tank gun ready for instant action, although none came. Until the first week of June our campaign experience had been limited to marching, digging in and mounting guard. We passed through villages that seemed deserted, as if the inhabitants had fled. We knew they had not because here and there one saw civilian figures moving about.

‘It was at the beginning of June when we marched into the area of the Somme and carried out a relief of another division. We were now in the combat zone but still there was no sight or sound of warfare, at least not from the enemy side. There was no shelling, no machine-gun fire and only the occasional aeroplane, which was soon chased off by our Messerschmitts. It was different on our side of the river. Things were very lively. Each night a stream of vehicles, guns and tanks moved into the combat area. On 4th June our anti-tank gun platoon was ordered down to the river bank to give direct support fire when the battle opened.

‘We moved our guns into position that night and camouflaged them. Our orders were that there was to be no talking, smoking or fires. We were to lie in our slit trenches all night and all next day until the barrage opened. Then we could come out of cover, but even then we were not to move far as we might be called to action at any time. It was during that day that the French opened up with their big guns and although their shells did not fall among us but in our artillery belt they caused damage. It could not be otherwise considering the men, guns, horses and vehicles that were packed into the assault area.

‘There was an Order of the Day read out, but we anti-tank gunners did not hear it until the following day. We were all lying in our slits pretending not to be there – in accordance with orders. The French called the defences on this sector the “Weygand Line” and these defences consisted chiefly of field fortifications. There were a few strong-points, but these were very old and dated from the war of 1870. Our division’s orders were to cross the river and to build a bridgehead. The panzer units would break out from that bridgehead. A quarter of an hour before the barrage opened wireless silence was lifted and we in the forward positions were given final details over the radio of what was about to happen. Not far from us bridge-building units had brought up their material by night and assault engineers had carried their boats to the edge of the river. Everything was now ready.

‘The barrage when it opened was an incredible sight. It was the first real bombardment most of us had seen. It began with a rumble of explosions behind us and then whistling sounds as the shells passed overhead to burst with splashes of bright light on the enemy across the river. Soon the whole of the area on the other side of the Somme was shrouded in smoke so that we could not see the shells exploding but only a fiery red where some house or farm had begun to burn. By now we were standing on the river bank watching a spectacle we had not seen before, fascinated by what we were seeing. Figures ran past us carrying rubber assault craft. The infantry were going into action. Ahead of them the Assault Engineers had already crossed the river and had disappeared into the clouds of smoke on the far side of the Somme. From the French positions there must have been a machine gun in action for a stream of tracer flew slowly overhead. The machine gunners must

have been firing blind because they were not aiming at anything but were firing for effect.

'We heard later on that the French in their positions had survived the shelling and come out as our infantry closed in. The assault battalion of our regiment suffered very heavy losses but had taken the trenches from a Senegalese regiment which held them. The blacks had resisted heroically and there had been hand-to-hand combat in some places. Then, quite suddenly, the Senegalese had broken and just stopped fighting although their snipers were very active all day and had to be winkled out one by one. The other infantry regiment of our division crossed the river under quite heavy fire and lost a lot of men although, again, because of the smoke and the morning mist we did not see any fall. All we saw were figures climbing up the river bank and disappearing into the reeds and bushes along the bank.

'At 0700 hrs we were called to take post. The French were making a counter-attack with armour. We waited for several hours but apart from hearing shell and machine-gun fire we took no part in the fighting. The other Senegalese units of the Colonial Division facing us began to crumble under the pressure of the infantry and panzers which had crossed into the bridgehead. The black division just ran away. Strangely enough the soldiers took their boots off so that they could run more quickly.

'Our division rolled over the field defences of the Weygand Line and into the Champagne region of France. Two days later we anti-tank gunners received the order to move forward and cross the river. The smell of burned-out houses was very strong but there were no dead bodies to be seen. Our military police had organized the Senegalese into burial details and had had to be very firm because at first they had refused to do this type of work.

'My introduction into the soldier's trade had been a very easy one. I saw a battle, but took no part in it, saw no dead bodies and not even wounded men although our division suffered quite heavy losses in this, its first action. The only sights of war were the burned-out houses and the only sounds the shellfire and the machine-gun fire which passed over and caused us in the anti-tank gun platoon no casualties. As I said this easy battle had not prepared me for the horrors I encountered during my first battle in Russia.'

## OPERATION 'SEALION'

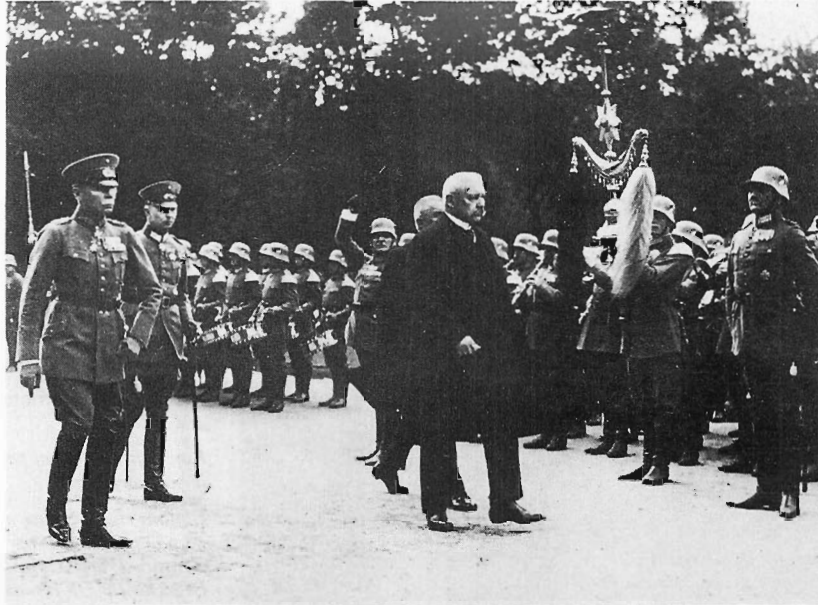
After the signing of an armistice with France there was no nation on the mainland of western Europe to challenge Germany. Those countries that she had not subjugated by force of arms were anxiously neutral and hopeful of remaining so. The United Kingdom remained, as yet, unassailed. The Republic of Ireland was neutral but had, if not a pro-German then at least an anti-British, bias.

'A group of islands remained as yet unassailed.' Therein lay the problem which faced the Führer. Should he attack Britain or not? His first inclinations were to hope that the British Government, aware of the country's hopeless military position, would accept his offer of peace and bring the war to an end. Working along the line of reasoning that conciliation might influence the population of Great Britain, he ordered a reduction in the scale of air operations in the UK area and forbade the bombing of the British mainland. If Hitler at that time was uncertain of what he should do this was because events had moved so suddenly. Hermann Goetzl was a Captain and a company commander of Fallschirmjaeger. Recalling those days he wrote:

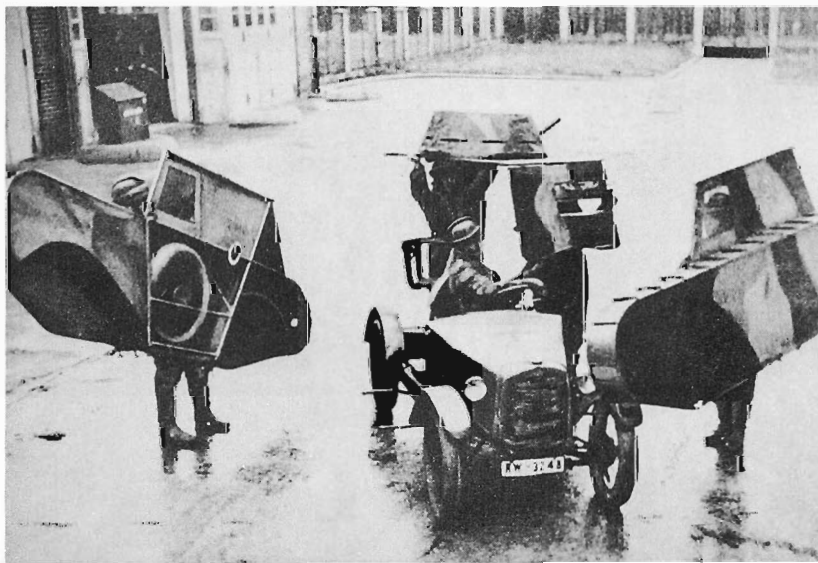
'During the planning of the campaign against France in 1940, neither Hitler nor the German General Staff reckoned with the need to attack the British Isles at the end of the campaign. We were not prepared mentally for such an enterprise. Hitler had evidently drawn the wrong conclusions from British political attitudes and intentions . . . When at last plans were issued for Operation "Sealion" much valuable time had been lost. Lacking any sort of planned preparation one had to depend upon improvisation . . . Whether Hitler had any serious intention of carrying out "Sealion" is doubtful. He had a reluctance to undertake operations overseas. The pre-history of the Crete operation and the abandoning of the planned attack upon Malta would seem to confirm this.'

Luftwaffe General Deichmann, at the time Chief of Staff of 2nd Flieger Corps, believed that there had never been a real intention to invade Britain. He bases this on the fact that when Admiral Raeder spoke about a landing in Britain, Hitler rejected it as 'impossible to carry out'. The wording of Hitler's Directive of 16 July, contained, in Deichmann's words the unusual sentence, 'I have decided to prepare a landing operation and, if necessary, to carry this out . . .' The General's opinion is that the measures taken for 'Sealion' were political pressure applied to the British to force them to make peace. As he sees it, 'There is no other explanation why an operation which he had described as impossible should become possible within the space of three months.' To develop his theme Deichmann cites the introduction to the OKW Directive of 7 August, which contains the phrase 'Whether and if we land in England . . .' One does not, in Deichmann's opinion, ' . . . use such words if one is resolved upon a course of action . . . I can remember', he continued, 'that the impression which I received from this order was that we would not undertake a landing. One must also bear in mind that this Directive was issued before the air war expanded . . . The only connection between the expansion of the air war against Britain, a purely political aim, and of "Sealion" is that Directive No 17 contained the order that the Luftwaffe was to remain fit for action. That goes to prove my belief that the expansion of the Air War and "Sealion" were two independent tasks . . . As Chief of Staff of 2nd Flieger Corps, which served at the main point of

*Right: It was during the presidency of Paul von Hindenburg that Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. (M. Klein)*



*Right and below: Under the conditions imposed by Versailles, the German Army was forbidden armoured fighting vehicles. To overcome that restriction the future commanders of the Panzer force learned how to control armour en masse by using plywood or canvas substitutes, on military manoeuvres.*







*Left: A member of the Hitler Youth receiving flight training in a glider. Such measures produced a pool of pilots for the Luftwaffe, as described by Georg Cordts in his account of jet fighter training.*

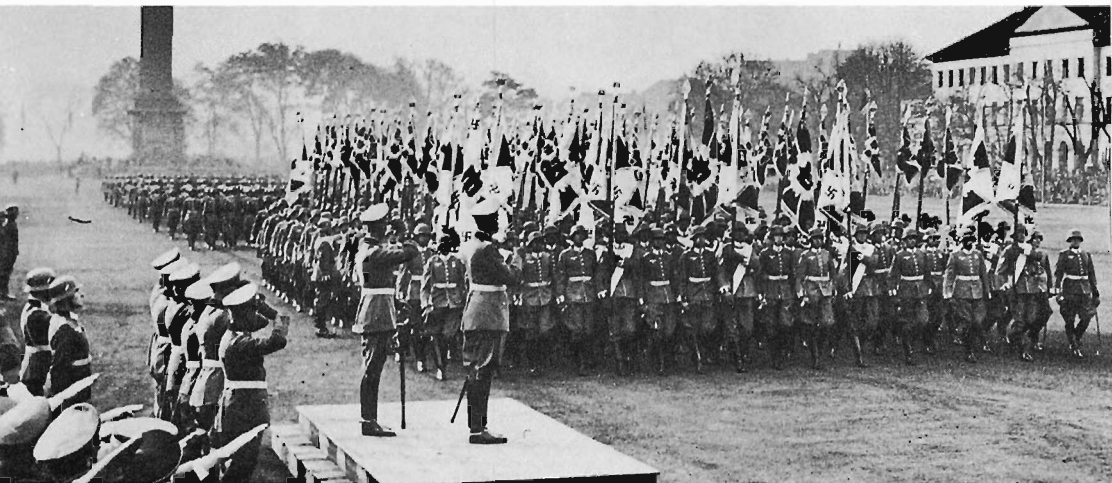
*Below: Taking the oath of allegiance was the climax of a recruit's life and the focus of much tradition. This is Brunswick in January 1936.*

*Bottom: The new German Army's Standards are paraded in Berlin in the days of power and glory before the Second World War.*

*Right: A poster recruiting men for the paratroop arm of service.*

*Far right: A formal parade by a Luftwaffe unit in pre-war days.*

*Bottom right: Senior military commanders attending a pre-war parade; from left to right, Generals Milch (Luftwaffe), Keitel (OKW), von Brauchitsch (OKH), and Raeder (OKM).*





# ALLSCHIRMJÄGER

UNGEN BEI ALLEN WEHRBEZIRKSKOMMANDA





*Left: On 7 March 1936, the German Army received a warm welcome when it re-entered the Rhineland, which had been demilitarized under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.*



*Left: This photograph was taken during army manoeuvres in 1937, on the occasion of a visit by Mussolini to Germany. Goering and Mussolini are in the foreground with Hitler and Ciano in the background.*

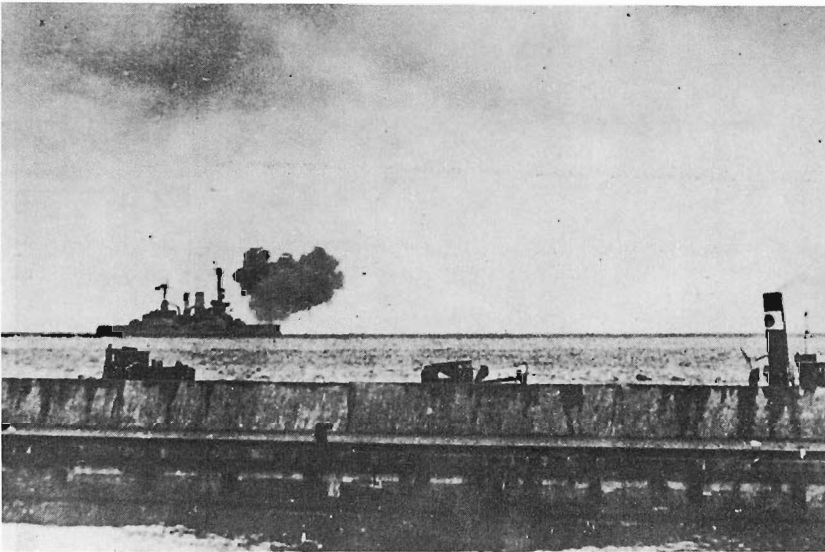


*Left: German infantry marching through Wenceslas Square, Prague, and German tanks, Panzer IIs, at a parade after the occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939.*

*Right: German soldiers remove the Polish eagle marking the border between the two countries, 1 September 1939.*



*Right: The German battleship Schleswig Holstein bombarding the Westerplatte during the Polish campaign in 1939.*



*Right: German civilians listen to the public radio announcement on 1 September 1939 telling them that their country is at war.*







*Left: When the commandant of the Polish forces in Lemberg was forced to capitulate he insisted that a German Gebirgsjäger formation take the surrender.*

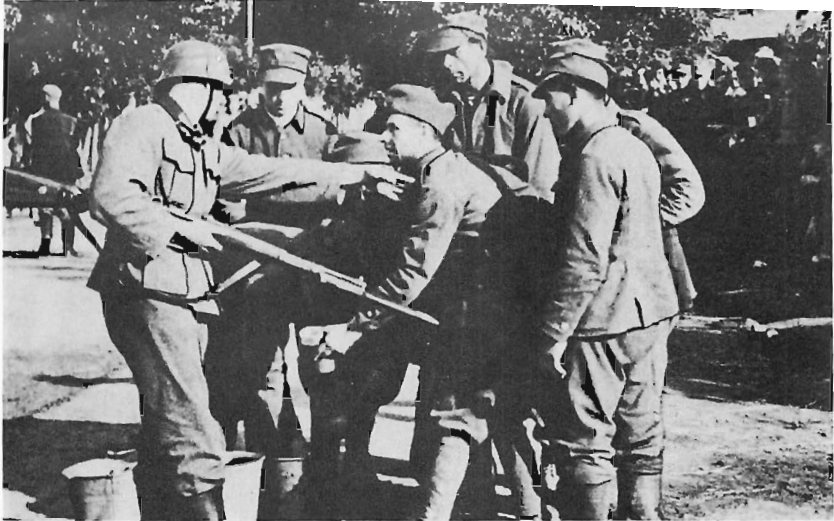


*Left: Hitler visiting servicemen who had been wounded during the Polish campaign.*



*Left: Hitler and General Busch watching German soldiers cross a river in Poland.*

*Right: German soldiers guard Polish prisoners of war at a water point. The Poles fought hard but they could not stem the German Blitzkrieg.*



*Right: HMS Glowworm laying smoke as she attempts to ram the German cruiser Admiral Hipper during operations off Norway in 1940.*



*Right: German Alpine troops disembarking in a Norwegian port, April 1940.*





*Left: German Alpine troops prepare for the battle ahead.*



*Left: German military units disembark from their improvised landing craft in Norway.*



*Left: German infantry massed behind a ruined Norwegian building take cover while preparing to continue with their advance.*

*Right: Narvik harbour, April 1940. The German destroyers are moored; the ships in the background are either sinking or burning.*



*Below: Kapitän zur See Bonte, who led the ten destroyers of Naval Battle Group 1 at Narvik. He was killed in action on 10 April 1940.*

*Below right: Fregatten-Kapitän Berger, who commanded the 1st Destroyer Flotilla of Naval Battle Group 1 at Narvik.*







*Above: Fregatten-Kapitän Schulz-Hinrichs, commander of the destroyer Erich Koellner, which was sunk by the Royal Navy on 13 April 1940. Note the 'Narvik Schild' he is wearing on his sleeve, a distinction awarded to all ranks of the services who fought in the Narvik battles.*

*Above and below: Korvetten-Kapitän Wolff, captain of Georg Thiele, which was sunk in Narvik Fiord.*



# Morgenblatt

## Frontzeitung im Narvikfjord

Nr. 6 Dienstag, den 22. April 1940

### Der OKW-Bericht — eine stolze Bilanz!

Flugzeuge bei Luftangriffen und Luftkämpfen abgeschossen — Panzer erzwungen die Entschcheidung bei Gjevick — Zwei feindliche U-Boote vernichtet

wurde gestern nachmittags durch feindliche Seeboote beschlossen, ohne dass deren Landungsversuch gegen deutsche Truppen hinaus kam. Die im Dienst im Einsatzen Verbände ergriffen für die Durchführung der Operationen Pläne. Zu erwähnen ist ein hartes Gefecht bei Borsen, welches durch vier deutsche Truppen Teile des um eine Anzahl Geschütze und W.P. Materialbesitz. Die Verbände zwischen dem feindlichen Truppen besetzten das Christland bis zur Bergseite.

Raum von Oslo in bedeutend norwegischer. Bedeutend deutschen Truppen parawalken Antennen auf gestellt und angewiesen unsere Truppen um Gjevick und Län und den Höhenrückzug. Der Gegner hatte keine Kampfverbände feindliche Landungs bei Narvik und Anstalten, die mit feindlichen Truppen besetzt sind und schaden. Ein Artillerie wurde getroffen zwei Hundeschiffe vernichtet. Welter, halben Kampfverbände Widerstand zu brechen und zerstören. Die mit einem Material getrieben in die bei Hovey, selbst

Britische Flugzeuge griffen den norwegischen Flugplatz Alesund an ohne Personen und Sachschaden anzurichten. Dabei wurden die britische Flugzeuge dann ein weiteres in der Nacht über deutschen Küstengebiet abgeschossen. Im Westen keine besonderen Ergebnisse. Deutsche Flugzeuge stießen bei der Fernaufklärung über Frankreich bis Bordeaux vor. Im Laufe des Tages kam es zu einer Reihe von Luftkämpfen, in deren Verlauf zwei britischen Flugzeuge und zwei französischen Flugzeuge abgeschossen wurden. Drei deutsche Flugzeuge behielten von Feindflug nicht zurück. Ein Flugzeug wurde wegen Benzinmangels auf Schweizer Gebiet notlanden.

Bei der Abwehr feindlicher Luftangriffe und im Verlauf von Luftkämpfen wurden im Verlaufe des gestrigen Tages elf Flugzeuge und zwei vier britische und zwei französische abgeschossen. Von diesen stürzten bei einem Angriff auf den Flugplatz Alesund zwei britische Bombenflugzeuge sowie auf dem deutschen Küste vier britische Flugzeuge in Flammen ab und verbrannten. Die übrigen Flugzeuge wurden in der Weidenschaft durch deutsche Jäger abgeschossen. Die Aufträge lagen zum Teil auf feindlichem Gebiet.

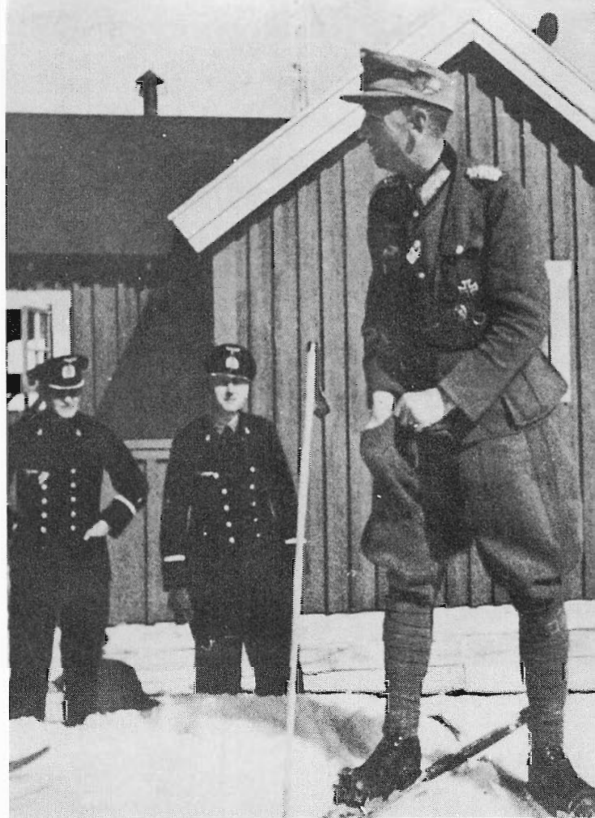
Wie das OKW bereits bekannt gab, wurde Gjevick von deutschen Truppen genommen. Kampf mit norwegischen Truppen gewonnen wurde. Der Gegner hatte sich in dem im die Verteidigung um den angrenzten Gelände festgesetzt und versuchte die Stadt zu halten. Der einst stark deutscher Panzerverbände brachte jedoch keine schadhafte Entscheidung. Die Panzer ergriffen bei dem Einsatz dieser Verbände, die zum Teil in ihre Rückzugsweg einsetzten, die schwere Verluste. Die aus den von deutschen Truppen besetzten Küsten abgesehen, die Abteilungen lassen erkennen,

dass die von ihnen abgerufenen Mengen an Waffen und Material keineswegs eine ausgiebige Unterstützung bedeutet. Bei einer systematischen Durchkäufung der Häfen und Depothäfen werden gewerliche Besatzungen einstellt, die alle Erwartungen übertreffen. So wurden vor allem in Narvik rund 300 000 Beta-Militärartikel sichergestellt, die für England bestimmt waren.

### Die Heimat wird über Narvik unterrichtet

Informationen aus dem Reich durch gestrig eingetroffen Nachrichten besagen, dass die Heimat über die Vorgänge in und um Narvik unterrichtet ist. Die gesamte Wehrmacht gab bereits Bildstreifen des grossen Gefechts vom 18. April wieder, während die Tagespresse und die illustrierten Zeitschriften voller Bilder und Berichte von der Überfahrt nach Narvik, der Landung, Besetzung von Schiffen und den Kämpfen sind. Der grossdeutsche Rundfunk hat ebenfalls in mehreren Sendungen Aufnahmen wieder gegeben, die sich über alle Sender und auch mit Richtstrahlern über die verschiedenen Kurvenwege der Erde. Die Heimat weiss von Narvik und den Kämpfen, die die Truppen hier durchzuführen haben.

Dr. Franziska Moberg schreibt im Auftrag des Wehrmachtbefehlshabers von Narvik von der Marine-Propaganda-Kompanie West-Station Narvik herübergekommen. Die Schiffslösung ist in Zimmer 31 in der Adresse Alle Anträge und nach Beratung geben. Druck im Ofoten-Verlag, Oslo, Norwegen.

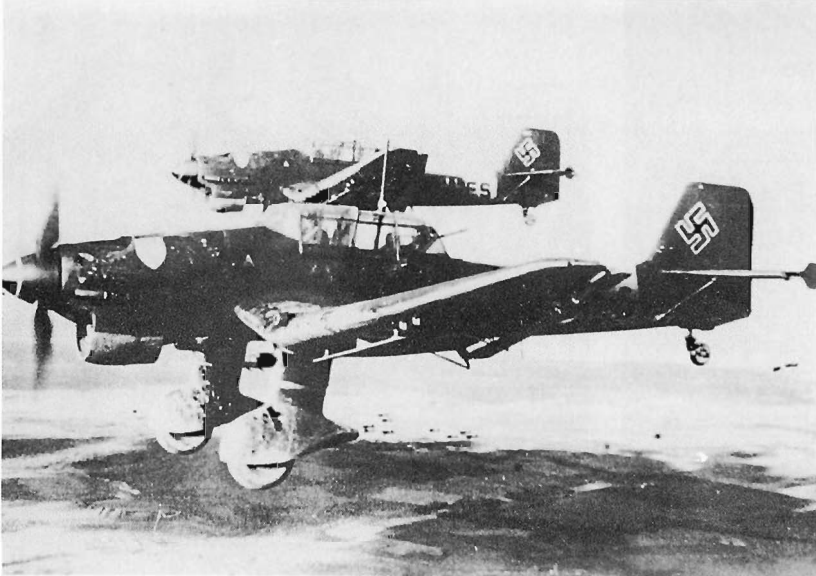


Above: General Dietl, commander of the German military forces at Narvik, with two naval officers from ships sunk during the battle.

Below: Dietl with men of the Gebirgs regiments that captured Narvik.

Above: The front page of issue no 6 of the newspaper published for the German forces serving at Narvik. It was the product of the Naval Propaganda Company, whose editorial offices were in Room 21 of the Grand Hotel in Narvik.

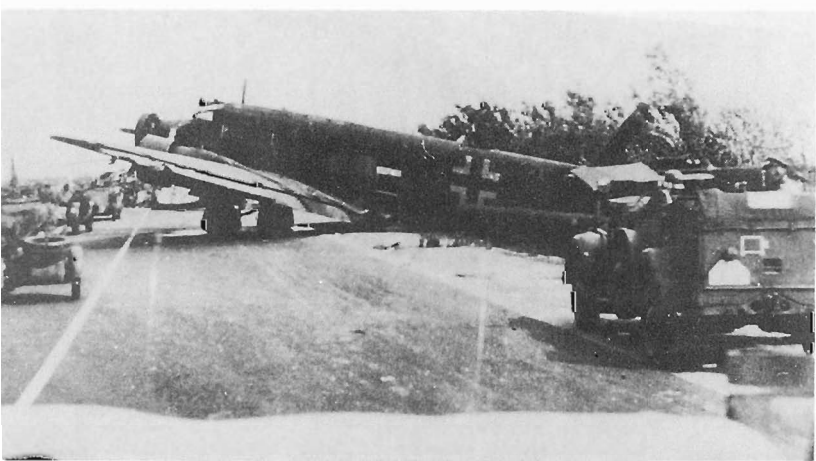




*Left: The Ju 87 dive-bomber, one of the two principal components of Blitzkrieg. Although nearly obsolete at the outbreak of war, the Stuka went on to serve effectively for several more years.*



*Left: The first German vehicles move into Roermond, Holland, in May 1940.*



*Left: Campaigning in Holland, May 1940. Reconnaissance units of the SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler drive past Ju 52s which had made unsuccessful attempts to air-land Fallschirmjäger on Dutch airfields.*



*Above: A motorized half-track column passing marching infantry during the German advance towards Dunkirk in late May 1940. (H. Schmidt)*



*Right: German assault troops crossing the River Maas during the opening stages of the French Flanders campaign in May 1940.*

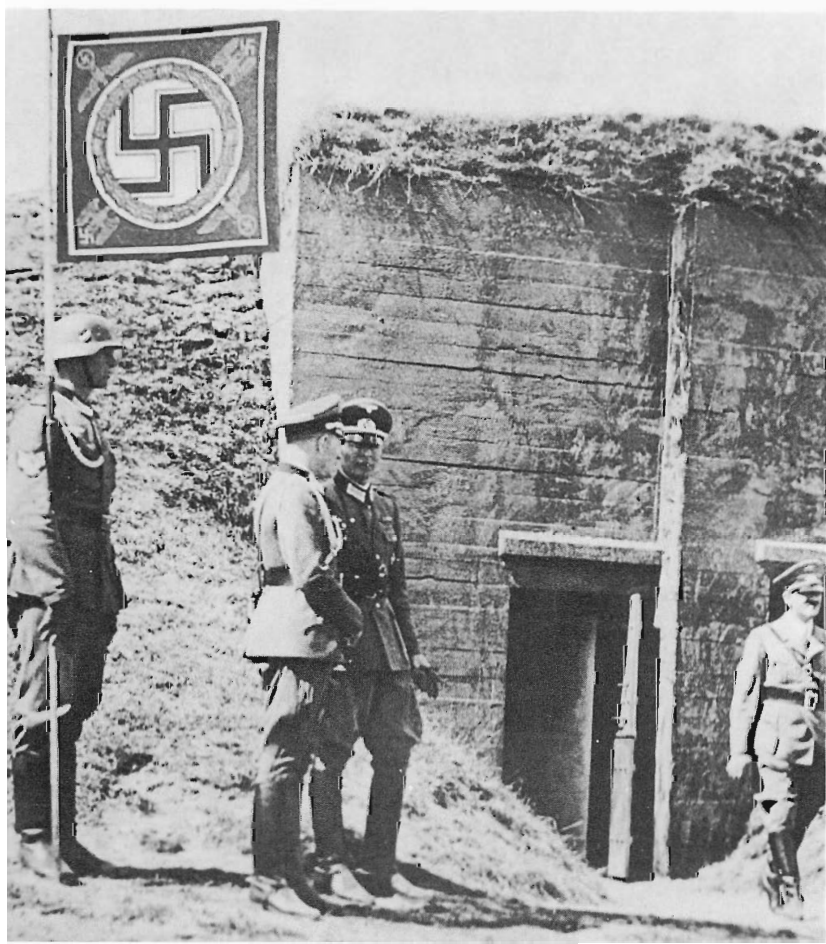
*Right: SS General 'Sepp' Dietrich shaking hands with Wilhelm Monke, who was accused of shooting British prisoners of war at Wormhoudt, Belgium.*







*Above: 'Das Ganze - Halt', the traditional German army bugle-call; in this photograph it has brought the campaign in France to an end.*

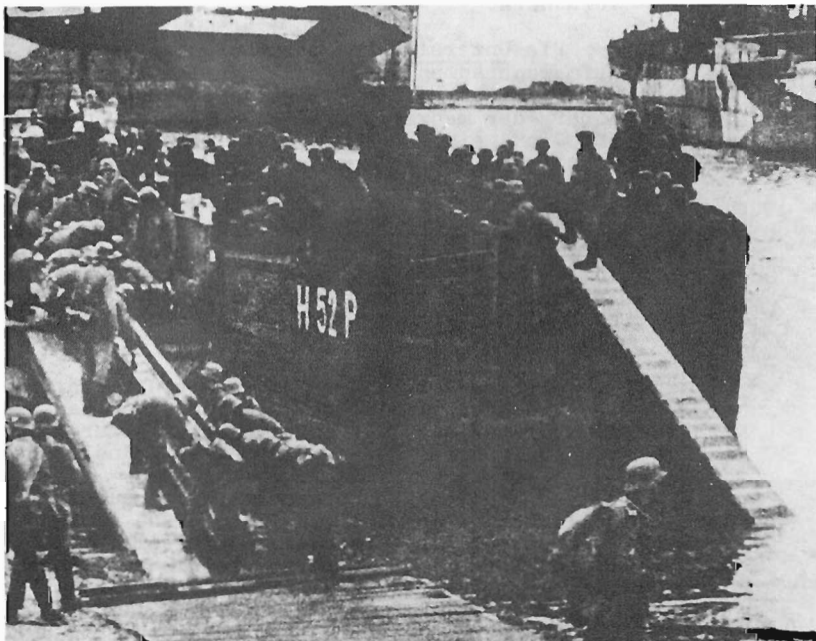


*Left: At the end of the campaign in the West, Hitler made a visit to France, during which he returned to those areas of the Western Front where he had fought in the First World War and made a pilgrimage to military cemeteries. He then went on to inspect fortifications in the Maginot Line.*

*Right: German troops inspecting a causeway of army lorries on the Dunkirk beaches that the British used as embarkation piers.*

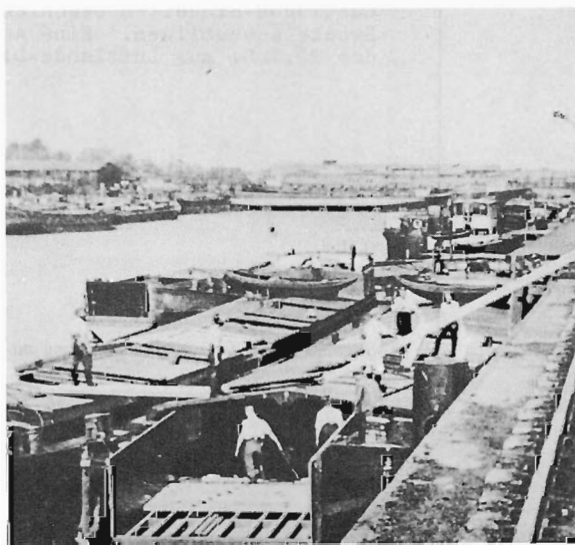


*Right: An exercise along the Atlantic coast by units training for the invasion of Britain.*



*Below: A vehicle of Rommel's 7th Panzer Division on the Channel coast at the St. Valéry area, where he received the surrender of a combined Anglo-French force in 1940.*

*Below right: A river barge converted to an assault craft in preparation for Operation 'Sealion', the invasion of Britain.*



[Anlage]

L I L

F.H.Q., den 25.6.40

Betr: Luftwaffenseitige Grundlagen für eine Landung in England.

1) Voraussetzung ist Luftüberlegenheit.

Diese kann errungen werden im Zuge der Belagerung Englands durch Angriffe gegen die Luftfahrtindustrie, gegen mögliche Zufuhren von Übersee und durch den Materialverschluss des Gegners bei der Abwehr unserer Angriffe.

Wann diese Überlegenheit erkämpft ist, kann gegenwärtig noch nicht angegeben werden, z.Zt. ist sie noch nicht vorhanden.

2) Die Unterstützung des Übergangs kann aus den derzeitigen Aufmarschräumen erfolgen. Hierbei ist es bei der gegenwärtigen Stärke der Fliegerverbände noch gleichgültig, ob an einer oder mehreren Stellen übergegangen wird. Jedoch kann auf Grund eintreffender Verluste eine Zusammenfassung der restlichen Kräfte zum Schutz nur einer Übergangsstelle notwendig werden.

3) Die Luftwaffe kann den Übergang ferner durch Einsatz der 7. Flieger- (Fallschirm-) Div. vorbereiten. Die Division ist in etwa 4 Wochen (7) voll verwendungsfähig. Es stehen zu diesem Zeitpunkt jedoch nur etwa 7 Transportgruppen zur Verfügung, so dass die gesamte Division in einem Anflug nicht abgesetzt werden kann.

Hieraus folgt, dass die Fallschirmkräfte für den ersten Überfall verhältnismäßig gering sind, was eine Zusammenfassung nur an einer Übergangsstelle zur Folge hat. Die Wahl der Abetzstelle bedarf noch einer gründlichen Erkundung.

4) Da der Übergang des Heeres sich nur sehr langsam vollziehen wird, ist eine rasche und laufende Verstärkung der zunächst eingesetzten Teile der Fallschirm-Div. notwendig. Hierfür stehen in erster Linie die restlichen Kräfte der 7. Flieger-Div. zur Verfügung.

Ferner kann jedoch eine Unterstützung durch Luftlandung notwendig sein. Hierzu ist es erforderlich, geeignete Luftlande-Einheiten beschleunigt aufzustellen und für diese Zwecke auszubilden. Eine Anordnung für baldige Umwandlung der 22.I.D. zur Luftlande-Div. ist deswegen notwendig.

[gez.] Frhr. v.F.

*Above: A Luftwaffe memorandum setting out the conditions required for a successful invasion of the United Kingdom.*

the Battle of Britain and who controlled the Fighter mass during the first phase of the operation, I see "Sealion" and the Battle of Britain as two completely separate projects.'

It would seem, however, that some people were thinking about an assault upon the United Kingdom. Late in 1939 OKH, perhaps to exercise its own mind and that of its sister services, asked for comments on 'Study Northwest – a proposed invasion of Great Britain', which it had produced. The Luftwaffe High Command reply was brief and negative. 'The planned air landings would be made at the point where the enemy's air defences are strongest. Even allowing for the fighter strength which would be available [to us] in the summer of 1940, we should still not have sufficient to succeed. The planned operation can only be considered within a framework of absolute air superiority and even then only when surprise can be guaranteed.' The conclusion to this brusque rejection reads, '. . . a combined operation whose objective is a landing in Great Britain must, therefore, be rejected. It should only be made as the final act of an already successful war against England, for otherwise the pre-conditions for the success of a combined operation do not obtain.'

Lord Halifax's laconic rejection of Germany's offer of peace was taken by Hitler as a deliberate insult and the Führer decided upon 'Sealion'. He knew with what speed his Command staffs could produce a battle plan and his Directive No 16, ordered that active planning be undertaken. What he did not anticipate was being dragged into a dispute between OKH and OKL. The army demanded the widest possible assault area because a narrow one, in Halder's view, would be tantamount to 'putting the troops through a mincing machine'. The navy pointed out that it lacked escort vessels for the width of front demanded by OKH and asked the Führer for a decision. On one thing all parties were agreed; there could be no successful invasion without superiority in the air over Britain. The senior commanders of the Luftwaffe had no doubt they could achieve this with little difficulty although they accepted that the RAF would not be caught on the ground and there destroyed as had been the case in Poland. It would, therefore, be necessary to crush Fighter Command in aerial battle. 'Thereafter', in the words of a Luftwaffe memorandum, 'the bombers will be able to attack the centres of British industry, to operate against shipping bringing in supplies to British ports and to support the army in its field operations to the north of London.'

Hermann Goetzl described a War Game organized by Colonel General Busch, commanding Sixteenth Army, which had as its base line the situation as it would be on D-Day plus 4. The premise was that air superiority would have been gained by that time. Things did not, in fact, develop as the two hundred participating commanders had anticipated. The air superiority which each service had insisted upon as a *sine qua non* for a successful invasion never materialized.



During the time that the Battle of Britain was being fought Hitler had already decided to attack the Soviet Union, but, in an obvious attempt at a war of nerves, allowed the planning of 'Sealion' to continue. Among the units committed to practising the now pointless invasion exercises was 1st Gebirgs Division. Alfred Spies's unit was stationed just behind the Channel coast. He wrote:

'We had been trained in Alpine warfare and the task we would face when we landed in Hastings would have been very easy for us. We were to disembark, cross the shingle beach and scale the cliffs which are behind the promenade. Part of our training had been to drive British Army lorries – captured during the campaign in France and from the Dunkirk beaches. In that way we would be able to use British vehicles once we had broken out of the bridgehead. After we had carried out the first landing on the beach at Hastings we were to move inland.'

Orders issued by 7 Corps confirm this. Paragraph 6 of those instructions, dated 10 September, that is to say when Hitler had already turned his mind eastwards, includes the sentence, ' . . . The first rule for all leaders and men is that immediately upon landing on the English coast, efforts must be made to reach a line at least 2 kilometres from the beach . . . '

## PREPARING FOR OCCUPATION

As if it were not farcical enough that men and machines were being trained for an invasion that would not take place, consider the SD Detachment Wolff, which was formed in order to act as a provisional government in England. The recruiting methods were bizarre. More emphasis was laid upon adherence to Party doctrine than to any other likely essential qualification. For example, candidates enlisting into this highly secret body were required to have a knowledge of English, of England and of the way of life in these islands. Included among those who were accepted as meeting this qualification was a man whose knowledge of England was limited to a weekend spent in Yorkshire, made several years before the war. Another man spoke English which was heavily accented with Boer overtones for he had spent a long time in South Africa. Another's command of English was limited to conventional expressions, halting and fragmentary. To begin with the unit was incorporated into a Waffen SS battalion. 'We asked who these people were,' recalled one former member of the unit, 'because they were obviously not part of our organization. We were told to mind our own business. Then, one day they were gone.' They had been posted to a quieter place where lessons in Nazi political dogma were the principal tuition, followed by lectures on Trades Unionism, Freemasonry and the British political system. There were practical lessons on using small arms, and many instructions, such as the one

which directed that upon arrival in England the SD members were to obtain civilian clothes from British tailors. The group's billets were to include the Strand Palace Hotel and a club in St James's and they would avail themselves of the archives and facilities of Scotland Yard to combat any resistance movements.

In connection with the SD group obtaining civilian suits before they arrived in London, it is interesting to note from Appendix No 4 to Corps orders that: '[In order] to avoid a strain on the supply services from the mainland of Europe, troops are to live off the land. The need of the troops takes priority over those of the civil population. Receipts in the German language will be given for all materials taken for the prosecution of the war (food, fuel, etc.) as well as payment for any services performed by the civil population. The removal of any object for private purposes without payment will be considered as looting and will be punished accordingly.'

'The question which must have been uppermost in the mind of those who were Fallschirmjaeger at the time [of "Sealion"] and who would have had to fly the mission, must have been, for how long they would have to hold out without support? Lightly armed para and glider troops may be able to drop and seize an objective using combat aggression and surprise. It is another thing to hold the objective against every type of heavy weapon that the enemy can bring up. Experience in Holland in 1940 had shown that it had taken three days for the army to link up with the Paras and that the Jaeger had been found to be physically exhausted. The question must have been, how long would it take the panzers and heavy weapons to be brought across the Channel? Every soldier knows he has to take risks in battle. None, however, is keen to go into a fight from which there will be no survivors. A Himmelfahrtskommando [a suicide mission] is not something one enters into in cold blood.' (R. Hoffmann)

Among the units created for the first phase of the 'Sealion' assault were flame-throwing tanks 'These were of two types – standard and submersible. I served on the standard version and our training was connected mainly with embarking and debarking from the ferries. These were very unstable craft which dipped when we boarded and which wallowed in even a light sea. They frightened me. I was afraid that they would capsize and that we crew would be trapped and drowned. I had heard that some standard tanks were sealed around the turret to prevent seepage in the event of a wet landing. The tanks in our Troop were not sealed in that way. We expected to roll off the ferry and on to the beach near St Leonards.'

As the days of inaction turned into weeks OKM warned that favourable weather and tide conditions were limited to a handful of days. Unless an invasion took place before October the chance would be lost until the following spring. This ultimatum forced Hitler to make a decision. He confirmed that no invasion attempt would be made in 1940, because the

preconditions for a successful undertaking had not been gained. Instead he would launch a quick war against Russia and once that had been won would come back to deal with the stubborn British.

As the wind-down continued without word that the operation had been cancelled, the SD group members were reduced to writing internal memoranda on the type of piping and braid that would be carried on uniform shoulder-straps. Alfred Spies's division marched away from the Channel coast leaving a battle group to train for an attack on the rock of Gibraltar – another aborted mission – and the mass of the army moved east to prepare for the new war with Russia. Then a new crisis arose. Italy, whose troops had invaded Greece, suffered a defeat at the hands of the outnumbered Greeks, to whose aid Britain then sent an expeditionary force. The British were back on the mainland of Europe and this alarmed Hitler. In the middle of the preparations to invade Russia he now had, thanks to Mussolini's incompetence, to intervene in the Balkans.

There remains as an epitaph of Operation 'Sealion', Hitler's bitter comment in 1944, to Engineer General Jacob, 'If I had only listened to my Engineers and not to the Navy, the invasion of Britain would have succeeded and the war would have been ended long ago.'

# Lebensraum in the East, 1941

## OPERATION 'MARITA'

For a period of almost a year after the surrender of France the German Army was not involved in active military operations. During that period of time the Luftwaffe fought the Battle of Britain and the Kriegsmarine continued to send out its U-boats and commerce raiders. In one famous surface action the German Navy gained a victory when *Bismarck* sank the British battleship HMS *Hood*, but suffered a crippling loss when *Bismarck* herself was destroyed. But the army, except for planning a number of missions which were then aborted, remained inactive until General Rommel took his divisions into a new continent – Africa.

Although the army was not involved in ground fighting in Europe, OKH was planning new campaigns. The one which was due to open in April 1941, Operation 'Marita' was planned to counter the British re-entry into the continent of Europe. A new BEF, drawn from units of Wavell's desert army, had entered Greece to support that ally in her fight against the Italian invaders. Hitler and OKW understood well the British strategy behind this move. The RAF component of the BEF now had bases on the European mainland from which to bomb the oil wells of Ploesti. The British had to be expelled from the Balkans if the oil supplies, essential to fuel the German war machine for the imminent campaign in Russia, were to be assured.

Only days before Operation 'Marita' was to be launched a crisis arose which expanded the parameters of the Greek operation. In the last week of March 1941, Paul, Prince Regent of Yugoslavia was overthrown and the young King Peter renounced the Treaty which Paul had so recently signed in Berlin. In Hitler's eyes this was base betrayal and he ordered that the attack upon Yugoslavia was to ' . . . smash her as quickly as possible . . . ' Within two days the Army High Command had produced a battle plan. Forces positioned in Austria, in Hungary and in Bulgaria were to strike from four directions to capture the capital Belgrade and to prevent a link up between the easternmost formations of the Royal Yugoslav Army and the Anglo/Greek forces.

The speed with which High Command planned and opened the campaign against Yugoslavia provides an excellent example of staff work. German Second Army, stationed in southern Austria, received sudden and

totally unexpected orders to take part in the forthcoming operation. High upon the list of army's imperatives was the capture intact of the bridge across the Mur at Radkersburg and orders descended swiftly through the echelons of command to the battalion selected for the task. Battalion organized a fighting patrol to carry out a surprise attack, the success of which would open the way for Second Army to flood into Croatia and head toward the capital.

## ADVANCE ON BELGRADE

'An Oberfeldwebel from our battalion carried out the assault and for it he was awarded the Knight's Cross . . . An account of his action was printed in the divisional newspaper and this read that the NCO had inspected the objective through binoculars and had realized how strongly protected it was. There was a large garrison of soldiers and armed officials occupying a Customs post on the far side of the bridge and on a low ridge, behind the customs post, there was a bunker with a field of fire which dominated the approaches to the iron bridge as well as the bridge itself.

'The Oberfeldwebel's plan was to take his patrol by assault boat across the fast-flowing Mur, entering the water some distance below the bridge. He would then take out the enemy positions from the flank. At dawn on 6th April his group launched their craft and began to paddle. Before they were half way across the river an alert Yugoslav sentry saw them and opened fire. There could now be no question of a surprise attack. Now it would be a matter of speed and determination. Half swimming and half wading the patrol reached the enemy bank and almost immediately came across a sentry near the customs post. The Yugoslav soldier was paralysed with fear. He was shot down and then the Oberfeldwebel rushed past the dead body and flung hand-grenades in at the windows. The men inside the building surrendered.

'By this time the soldiers in the bunker had opened fire and our battalion's engineers could not cross the bridge to take out the explosive charges. One of the battle patrol spotted the detonating cable and cut it with the blade of his entrenching tool. The sergeant fired a Very light to signal that the patrol was going into the last stage of the operation – the capture of the bunker. The patrol members gave the NCO covering fire as he charged forward and flung explosive charges into the slits in the walls of the bunker. When the smoke cleared there was no longer any fire coming from the defenders. The shock which the Yugoslav soldiers in the bunker had suffered did not last long, but in that short time the engineers took out the fuzes and an infantry company stormed across the bridge to reinforce the battle patrol. The bunker was taken. The road forward was clear for Second Army.' (Alois Redl. Oberjaeger)

## BREAKING THE METAXAS LINE

The resistance of that first morning at Radkersburg was not repeated all the way along the battle nor was it met during the succeeding days of the campaign. There were, in fact, many units of Second Army which did not fire a shot in the eleven-day war against Yugoslavia which opened on the 6th and ended on 17 April. Operation 'Marita', the war against Greece, had begun on the same day but had not, however, been so swiftly concluded nor had the German Army trapped the Anglo-Greek formations in northern Greece as had been planned. The Allies fought a series of delaying actions, battles which although often brief of duration were bitter in intensity.

One of the longest and certainly the most bitter battle of the Greek campaign was the offensive by 18 Gebirgs Corps (5th and 6th Gebirgs Divisions), to break the Metaxas Line, a system of permanent fortifications, built to bar a Bulgarian invasion into the heartland of Greece.

'For several days we had been waiting in the mountains which separate Bulgaria from Greece and during the night of 5/6 April, moved forward to assault positions just below the crest. The night was bright, clear and bitterly cold and we lay out on the open slopes for the better part of six hours. At 0520 hrs the war began and we moved forward into the attack. Ahead of us our artillery was shelling the Greek main positions which we had been told were concrete bunkers, well sited and mutually supporting. Our officers had warned us not to under-estimate the Greeks. They were good warriors, holding first class positions. None of us realized at the time that it would take four whole days to break the enemy. Our infantry attacks, artillery barrages, even air bombardments by Stuka squadrons, had little effect upon the Greek defenders.

'During one attack our assault engineers, armed with flame-throwers and explosive charges, had taken out one bunker. The strain of the battle had its effect and having driven out the Greek defenders we sat down on the ground totally exhausted. My life nearly ended at that point. From out of nowhere, or so it seemed, a company of Greek infantry came charging at us with bayonets fixed. It was an absolutely frightening experience as the enemy charged down the slope towards us. I had not seen enemy soldiers close up before, but now they were frighteningly close. Then one of our machine-gun groups went into action and, almost as if being awakened from a dream, the rest of us opened fire. We killed all the enemy soldiers before they could reach us with their bayonets and fight us hand to hand.'

The heroism of the Greek units holding the Metaxas Line delayed Twelfth Army, but in other parts of Greece German advances reached the point where the Line was outflanked and its usefulness was at an end. The German offensive then pushed on, obstructed but not halted by the Greek, British and Imperial forces who fought one delaying battle after another as

they were pushed southwards towards Athens and Corinth. Harry Keilhaus, who served in the operations section of an infantry division, wrote: 'It must be admitted that the British campaign to slow down our advance was, by and large, very successful. As they withdrew, in leap-frogging moves, they left rearguards which then held our division's advance. As soon as we had regrouped to renew our attack the British units which had held us would slip away at night and behind them there would be another rearguard holding another important height. So it went on day after day. At Thermopylae the British rearguard held the German advance for five whole days.

'At Thermopylae the gap between the sea and the mountains was a first class defensive position and a skilful commander like Wilson, in charge of resolute soldiers, the cream of Britain's Imperial army, exploited to the full the strength of that position. We received reports that ships in Piraeus harbour were loading with British units and it was vital that our forces overhaul and capture those fleeing Tommies before they could embark and escape. The rearguard at Thermopylae held us until a great many units had pulled across the Corinth Canal and into the Peloponnese. To stop the remainder escaping, OKW mounted a para/gliders drop to capture the Corinth bridge. The attack upon the bridge was successful but those British who had already crossed the canal escaped to Egypt and to Crete.'

The following post-battle report by No 3 Company of Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler' was written by a former member of the Regiment (as it then was) and appears in the Leibstandarte history published by Munin Verlag. The advance of the SS Standarte had been held at several places by the determined resistance of Imperial units and in particular in the area of the Klidi Pass.

'At 1800 hrs Witt's battlegroup, reported that No 3 Company which had gone forward to reach Ptolemais had reached the entry to the [Klidi] Pass. It had encountered strong enemy opposition coming from field fortifications set up on the high ground on both sides of the road. The road forked. The left arm rose towards the village of Vevi, the right fork twisted towards the Klidi Pass. No 3 Company had the task of thrusting through the pass. Before it reached the level ground at the end of the pass, [it was] to halt and to take up positions against possible enemy attacks. Our battle patrol was led by Ustuf. Witt, a brother of the battalion's commanding officer.

'A motor-cycle combination headed the group. Then followed the patrol leader's car, then a 3.7 flak on a self-propelled gun carriage and a half-track carrying a platoon group and, finally, the first vehicles of the platoon. The motor-cycle combination dropped out with a puncture less than a kilometre from the objective and the AFV moved past it. Suddenly there was an explosion in front of us and enemy machine-guns opened up. We flung ourselves out of the vehicle and dived into wet ditches [on either side of the

road]. The vehicle drivers could not turn the trucks on the road. We kept our heads well down until the "gentlemen from the other side of No-Man's Land" quietened down a little. The first aid men came puffing up to us and told us that the three people in the car, Witt, Koch and Branhoff, the driver, were dead. Witt had been still alive when the stretcher bearers reached him . . . The CO's vehicle had run over a mine. That detonation must have unnerved the crew of the SP because they abandoned the vehicle leaving the driver to defend it with a pistol. Then, he removed the breech-block of the gun and took it with him as he, too, left the area . . .

'At 2200 hrs No 3 Coy disengaged from the enemy and dug in . . . At 2230 No 2 Platoon of 1st Company met strong enemy opposition near Vevi . . . 0200 on 11th April. No 1 Company is fired on. Enemy fire comes from along the whole length of the heights between Vevi and Keli and the main defence was based on 15 machine-guns backed by mortars. Later that night medium artillery reinforced the enemy defenders . . .'

### OPERATION 'MERCURY'

However tenacious the British and Imperial rearguard actions were, the German advance could not be halted and the campaign in Greece ended on 29 April. There was no rest for the German soldiers. Reinhold Hoffmann recalled a new song being sung: 'We have swept the Tommies from the Continent.' He continues:

'Europe, so the Party papers said, was once again under German control and in Africa, too, there had been dramatic developments. Erwin Rommel and the Afrika Korps had flung back General Wavell's desert army and was racing for the Suez Canal. If we Fallschirmjaeger could land at Suez and link up with Rommel, the war in Africa would be won. The difficulty was that Germany had no staging post in the eastern Mediterranean from which an assault [upon Suez] could be launched. Nor were our aeroplanes capable of flying non-stop from Greece to Egypt and back. Finally, we did not have a vast number of transport machines. The pre-condition to any assault upon the Suez Canal was the capture of an island between Athens and Egypt. The most obvious one was Crete. The orders were that we of 7th Flieger Division were to seize the island by para drop and glider landing.

'As I wrote earlier in this letter, the Luftwaffe did not have sufficient transport aircraft and could not, therefore, carry the whole assault wave in a single drop. As a consequence, the plan was for two waves of Jaeger; the first going in at dawn and the second later in the morning. This second assault was subsequently postponed until the afternoon. We were supported by a back-up division, not 22nd Airlanding, our sister division in Corps,



but by 5th Gebirgs. Because of the shortage of aircraft it was anticipated that the first elements of 5th Gebirgs Division would not be flown in until D plus 1, at the earliest.

‘Our officers made it clear that it was the Fallschirmjaeger task to capture the island and we accepted this. We said in jest that our follow-up division would arrive in time to take part in the ceremonial parade to mark the end of the campaign. In those days we were very lightly armed with none of the recoilless artillery and rocket-propelled weapons of later years. We could not take our heavy weapons – artillery and anti-tank guns – in the aircraft with us. The Ju 52 could not carry such loads. The heavy weapons would have to come by sea, but again our mood was so optimistic that we thought we Fallschirmjaeger by ourselves would be enough to bring the British and Greek defenders of Crete to their knees.’

### REINFORCED BY SEA

The island was invaded by airborne forces but the paratroops were at first only able to establish small bridgeheads. In order to defeat the defenders and to capture the island a fast back-up force, equipped with heavy weapons was needed. To General Student’s dismay the 22nd Airlanding Division, which had been the back-up formation during the 1940 campaign, could not be made available and 5th Gebirgs Division was substituted. This formation had gained an excellent reputation in the Greek campaign and in view of terrain conditions on Crete, was the logical choice for OKW to make. It was intended to airlift the 5th’s Gebirgsjaeger regiments to the island once the Fallschirmjaeger had established firm bridgeheads. Oswald Jahnke writes:

‘Much of what I now know of Operation “Mercury”, I have only learned since the end of the war. At the time of the operation we, the ordinary Gebirgsjaeger, knew nothing of the planning involved or why we had been chosen for the task. All those things we were to learn in later years and as a result of that post-war reading it is clear that when our division was selected for the Crete mission our General was given less than three weeks to organize its part in the operation. Planning the ground operations was the last link in the chain. We had first to reach the island before we could fight on it. We know now that the Luftwaffe had too few transport aircraft to carry both 7th Flieger Division and ourselves. The paras were to drop and to capture airfields. Then we Gebirgsjaeger would be brought in by air and the artillery and other heavy weapons would be brought by sea.

‘Although General Ringel had full authority to requisition the vessels which he needed, he received little help from the navy in the choice of craft. The convoy in which I sailed was made up of caiques – sailing vessels fitted

with an auxiliary engine. The Greek crews had to be pressed into service. Some deserted before we sailed and to make good the losses we were given Italian naval personnel.'

Because of the low speed of the caiques and so that the support weapons would be immediately available to the paras when they dropped, the sailing component left the Greek ports two days before D-Day.

'We boarded our caique in Piraeus harbour. It was a small, smelly vessel harbouring a wide variety of tenacious insect life. Most of us decided to sleep on deck rather than go down into the vermin-ridden hold. We set sail after dark and hugged the coast. The sea was slight but the ship rolled alarmingly, probably due to the artillery pieces on the deck, which had altered the centre of gravity. Once we reached the open sea it became calmer and our caique rolled less. There was a lot of creaking and other noises as the ship chugged slowly along. We were forbidden to smoke on the deck and as there was nothing to see but waves, most of us lay down, wrapped our greatcoats around us and tried to sleep.

'Suddenly and without warning the sky was filled with brilliant white parachute flares which lit up whole areas of the sea. That blinding light lasted for about three minutes and when it died the night seemed to be darker than before. Then searchlights swept across the water and fixed on the ship ahead and to our port side. We saw several flashes from behind one of the beams and soon realized that these must be from enemy guns because soon shells began to explode on that caique. Soon she was alight and we could see our boys jumping into the sea. Our ship was illuminated by the fire and the lieutenant told us to put on our life-jackets and to remove our heavy, nailed boots. Barely had we done this when we too were caught by the searchlights and shells began to hit our ship. Some of our group took away the wooden partitions [bulwarks] and we formed two ranks. Our officer called "Good luck boys!" and ordered the first rank to jump into the sea. I was in the second rank and we had to wait until the first rank was clear of the ship's side. While we were waiting we were ordered to cut the lines on the life-rafts and to fling the rafts overboard. When we had done that we in the second rank formed up and jumped into the sea which was only two metres below us.

'All this happened in less than five minutes from the first ship being held by the searchlight to our jumping into the sea, but just as when one has a car accident, everything seemed to slow down so that it seemed as if hours had passed. The water was very cold and the shock of it took my breath away. Not far from me my section corporal was calling us to rally to him. The other NCOs were doing the same. Some men joined their groups towing behind them large pieces of wood and our lieutenant ordered that the wounded and the non-swimmers were to be put on to them. Those of us in the water joined hands so that we would not be swept away and also to give

us mutual comfort. All round us there were burning ships: a terrifying sight. Few of us had ever been on board ship in our lives and we could not imagine that we would be rescued. We just hoped and prayed that we would.

'It was a very long, cold night. The cold started at the toes and then worked up the legs, into the stomach and chest. The whole body seemed to be turning into a block of ice. During the night some of the wounded died and we lost men from the circle as well. At dawn the officer said that soon the sun would warm us and that the Luftwaffe would send out aircraft to look for us. It must have been about 8 in the morning when we saw the first seaplanes. They swooped over us and one of them fired off a signal flare. Not long after that a plane landed some distance from us. We were hauled aboard and given hot tea with rum. On the plane some of us became sea sick. We had not felt sick while we were in the sea, but the plane's motion upset us. After a thirty-minute flight back to Greece we were taken to a field hospital for examination.

'Two days later I landed on Crete – this time by Ju 52. It was there I fired English 25pdrs in action. We had been trained to use enemy weapons for just such an eventuality. These guns had been captured in the first days of the campaign and as our own had been lost when the convoy was sunk, we used the enemy's weapons against him.'

R. Pichler, another Gebirgsjaeger, wrote of his experiences during that sea journey.

'The High Command communiqué gave details of the action in which we were involved and this read, in part, "The first attempt, on 21st May, to bring reinforcements to Crete using motorized sailing vessels, was thwarted by the intervention of British light naval forces. In this operation British propaganda claimed to have killed thousands [of German troops]. In fact it was less than 200."

'We sailed out of Piraeus in the evening of 19th May, reached Milos during the evening of the second day's sailing and took course southwards to Crete. The convoy of twenty-one caiques was escorted by an Italian torpedo-boat . . . An alarm, false as it later turned out, forced us to return to Milos and later in the day the convoy changed course again, once more heading for Crete. As a result of these contradictory orders we did not reach Crete in daylight, as we could have done. Had we done so we would have arrived under the protection of the Luftwaffe, but instead we were still heading for the island when night fell. We were to learn that the enemy navy operated with safety in the hours of darkness.

'Shortly before last light a strong south-westerly wind whipped up the sea, which had been until then relatively calm and there was a heavy swell. Towards 2230 hrs, there was the sound of explosions which woke those of us sleeping on deck. Then we saw a huge shadow on our starboard side. That large vessel was obviously a warship. A searchlight beam from the port side

caught us. Then the searchlights went out and the night was lit only by one blazing caique. The enemy ships opened fire and it was soon clear that we were caught in a sea battle between our Italian escort vessel on the western side and the Royal Navy ships to the east.

'Things happened very quickly. We tried to escape by taking a south-easterly course but we seemed to be heading towards another naval battle. There seemed to be fighting going on all round us. We could see to the north-east of us, caique after caique hit and burning and lighting up the night sky. Quite suddenly the firing ceased and as the caiques sank there was darkness again.

'Course was changed to the south-west, our original course, and then the engine stopped. We had broken down but our Italian engineer soon had us moving again and with the motor running we breathed more easily. During the 20 minutes or so that we had no power we drifted helplessly and were nearly run down by a large ship which loomed out of the darkness. We sailed on with our nerves on edge. Most of us had fitted on two life-jackets, the wounded had all been provided for and we had taken off our heavy mountaineering boots. We were ready, if need be, to abandon ship taking our wounded with us. Two men equipped with knives stood by the ship's railings ready to cut the ropes holding in position one large and four small life-rafts.

'We altered course northwards and passed behind a large ship which suddenly blew up. It was clear she must have been loaded with ammunition. Then we turned eastwards leaving the blazing wreck behind us. To the south there was suddenly a violent explosion and three searchlights came on. Luckily their beams were directed westwards where a group of vessels from our convoy were illuminated and fired on. Our ship's motor stopped again. This time for a longer period. We turned our boat with its dead engine back on a northern tack and drifted with the waves. Suddenly our engine started up again and we steamed off changing direction several times. Behind us British searchlights swept backwards and forwards across the sea. The moon rose at 0300 hrs and we were afraid that we might be sighted. We prayed for daylight so that the Luftwaffe could attack the enemy ships. At about 0400 hrs we saw a German aeroplane, probably on reconnaissance, and felt that the Luftwaffe had saved us. The waves had gone down and so we sailed across a millpond sea to Milos. It was a glorious morning.'

A short time after the end of the campaign Leutnant Andreas Steiner of the Fallschirm Pioniere wrote an account of the action to a friend. This extract from his letter describes the voyage to Crete on board a caique carrying the heavy weapons of the Assault Pioniere:

'The belief expressed by our senior officers that the airborne assault would be sufficient [to capture Crete] proved false. We were ordered to board the caiques. Experiences gained from the Norwegian campaign showed it

was best to load one platoon on each ship. I was with No 2 Platoon and Company Headquarters Troop on the fastest ship which made 6 knots, maximum. Our departure was scheduled for the evening of D-Day minus 2 [D-Day was 20 May]. That was then cancelled, which meant that we would arrive in Crete 32 hours after the initial airborne landings had been made. According to rumour the delay was because the entire British Mediterranean fleet had sailed from Alexandria and was heading for Crete.

‘The evening of 19th May saw us at sea escorted by an Italian torpedo-boat – the *Lupa*. During the morning of 20th, waves of *Jus* flew overhead en route to Crete. During the morning of 21st while between Crete and Milos, we changed course and sailed in the opposite direction for a couple of hours before returning to our former course. That night when we were about 20 sea miles from Crete the British fleet caught us . . . I was below deck when we were intercepted, having turned in about 2130 hrs. Another officer and I had been discussing how unpleasant it would be if a torpedo were to smash into the ship. I had just gone off to sleep when noises on the deck awakened me. I took a life-jacket and on the deck soldiers were pointing and shouting, “There’s one burning!” Between 500 metres and a kilometre distant from us a ship was alight. Lieutenant Goette, officer i/c the 3.7 flak which was being carried on deck, shouted out, “The Greeks are getting panicky. Quick, put a guard behind each of them!” It was too late for, by that time, the Greek skipper had jumped overboard. Then suddenly two giant steaming lights came alongside us. I shouted out, “Alarm! Clear away the life-rafts!”, but already machine-gun fire and anti-aircraft shells flying over the bows had struck our port side. A searchlight opened up and then on the port side there was a huge ship heading straight for us. I was just able to say “There . . .” when we were hit and our caique’s stern was torn off.

‘I shouted out, “Keep calm. Abandon ship!” when a shell from a second British ship hit us. I felt something strike my head and when I stood up, for I had been flung into a corner like a football by the force of the explosion, there was another explosion. I was suddenly conscious of being alone and in the water and swam about almost deaf and blind. Then I heard voices calling and swam towards them. They were some of my men who were gingerly sitting on a few pieces of the wooden platform that had supported the AA gun. On that wooden support, no bigger than a table top, we spent the night. I have never been so cold in my life, for I was dressed in just a short-sleeved sports shirt, trousers and socks. We sat in the water up to our waists and were often soaked as waves broke over us. The wind force was between 7 and 8. We continued calling out and attracted three other men, one of whom was a badly burned gunner. His hair had been burned off and his hands and face were terribly burnt. The British continued their bombardment and soon three ships were in flames. A destroyer turned towards us suddenly and its searchlight swung in our direction. We all took cover and, thank God, we

were not seen. That destroyer followed by six others raced past us, only a few hundred yards away. Quite near us they shot a vessel to pieces. There were sounds of battle, some close at hand but others some distance away. Searchlights swept the sea and star shells lit up the sky.

'The night was unendingly long. During the course of the following morning we found a small life-raft into which we placed the wounded. Then seven Gebirgsjaeger came along in another life-raft and gave us two paddles. We already had one and with them tried to reach Crete which was between 10 and 15 kms away. Some of us sat on the raft and paddled while the others swam. There were frequent changes between rowers and swimmers. After a few hours we saw a sailing vessel and paddled like mad to reach her. It turned out later that the vessel had been abandoned because the engine had stopped and the wind was too light for the sails. During the day a few sea-planes flew about but we could not attract their attention. We all expected to have to spend another night at sea but then a Dornier 18 landed about a kilometre from us . . . There were 27 men on board that sea-plane, including eight men from my ship. At Phaeteron I met four men of my company who had been rescued earlier that morning. My men were taken to the military hospital. One of the doctors found me quarters in the officers' mess of a Flak regiment.'

## A PARATROOPER REMEMBERS

A great friend, Adolf Strauch, who contributed to *Storming Eagles*, my book on the German airborne forces, has supplied, for this work, an account which he has entitled 'A paratrooper remembers'.

'I was recently on holiday in Crete. Lying in the sea, not too far from the beach, to the west of Heraklion are a number of large stone discs. These hundreds of metres of stone form a long wall. It is not clear whether they are man-made or a natural phenomenon. One morning while paddling slowly through the water on my lilo I passed over the discs and noticed in the crystal clear water, half concealed by algae and seaweed, a round object. I dived in and soon had a German steel helmet in my hands.

'In the shade of the beach umbrella the sand was cool. In the distance cruise liners were sailing into Heraklion laden with holidaymakers impatient to enjoy a country whose ancient culture is the product of waves of ship-borne conquerors. The helmet in the sand reminds me of the 9,000 soldiers who, in May 1941, flew over the sea to capture the island. For the first time in the history of warfare the invaders came out of the sky. On the veranda of our bungalow hotel I sat talking with my wife with the helmet, the product of my snorkelling, near me. My mind recalled things. Here in this peaceful area runs the old road to Rtheymnon. We fought in the nearby vineyards

and olive groves and saw our first comrades die. I can still see it all in my mind's eye. They were late in jumping from the transport machines and fell in the sea. The weight of their equipment dragged them down. That was nearly forty years ago and the helmet is lying here by my side.

'A new morning. I crossed the old road and went through the vineyards to Tsalikaki. Here we had set up our field dressing station. Friendly young girls direct me to the little chapel where I light a candle and then eating bread and honey sit on a wall at the edge of the village and look westwards across the vineyards and olive groves. I am moved. Thoughts come and go. The vineyard in front of me was where I landed. It was 1600 hrs on 20 May. The shroud lines of my factory-packed 'chute – my old one had been left behind in Corinth – were entangled. I landed like a crashing helicopter near a weapons container. The searing heat took my breath away.

'The early summer was particularly hot with temperatures of 40 degrees in the shade, or more. Throughout the following days we suffered from a shortage of water and from terrible thirst. The sun blazed down upon our steel helmets. Distributed around our bodies – we had no tropical uniform – and in the pockets of our jump suit (known as a bone bag) we carried about 40kg of weapons, ammunition, rations and special equipment. Then we were given additional arms and ammunition from the container. Burdened down with that monstrous load we soldiers had to attack and fight.

'We, 7th and 8th Companies of 2nd Fallschirmjaeger Regiment, commanded by Captain Schirmer, had the tasks of covering the attack of our 1st Regiment upon Heraklion and holding a defence line facing to the west. Contrary to the battle plan we landed before 1st Regiment arrived over the target area. Enemy resistance was slight. We had soon found all our weapons containers, had grouped and had reached our start-line. At this point 1st Regiment flew in. I shall never forget it. The Ju 52s, without fighter escort, flying at an altitude of about 100 metres and with engines throttled back were met by a curtain of enemy flak and machine-gun fire. We saw burning and crashing transport aircraft; men leaping from the burning machines with their 'chutes on fire . . . and knew that we had lost a great many comrades.

'The earth these days is warm and open. In the vineyard busy hands are breaking up the soil. An old man spoke to me about his son in Germany. I look at the olive groves behind the vineyards. It was there that the enemy attacked us in battalion strength. They suffered heavy losses and I can still see the dead lying under the trees in front of us. The old man whose son is in Germany walked ahead of me through the field. It was from there that armed Cretans attacked us. We had not expected to fight against civilians and this upset us. After the Corinth Canal operation we, the first German soldiers in the Peloponnese and Argos, had been greeted by the civil population with oranges. But here the civilians had attacked us with weapons taken from our own containers; some of the Cretans were dressed in

camouflaged jackets taken from our own dead comrades and to deceive us they carried swastika flags. They were protected by neither the Hague nor the Geneva Conventions. We called them snipers. They had been told that we were not only airborne invaders of their island but also the sweepings of German gaols who would rape, plunder and destroy.

'In front of our positions a white cloth was waved. A sign for us to cease firing. We could see only the cloth. Was this an ambush? Some new trick by the insurgents? A volunteer was needed to find out. I volunteered and together with a Greek soldier who was to talk to the enemy, I walked forward and had soon found a badly wounded partisan (both the word and its meaning were unknown to us at that time). A burst of machine-gun bullets had smashed his leg. A German carbine lay only a few metres from him. We carried him back to our dressing station where he was treated by the Medical Officer.

'My wife and I made a pilgrimage to the German military cemetery at Maleme. I spoke to our courier about the Crete operation and he told me about his friend Manolis. On 20 May 1941, the 12-year-old Manolis was fishing near the harbour when we dropped from our aircraft. He was caught between the British and ourselves. A German paratrooper took him under cover, quietened him and gave him some chocolate from his rations. In an attempt to get the child to safety the paratrooper was killed.

'The walls of Heraklion are the mightiest in the whole Mediterranean area. Not far from the grave of the Cretan writer "Nikos Kazantzakis" (Alexis Sorbas) one can enjoy a magnificent view over the town and the sea. Below this place, at the west gate and the harbour we had our heaviest fighting. Here my school chum was killed. En route to Knossos I asked our German-speaking taxi driver to stop near the aerodrome. There was a ridge that I remembered. During the night of 25th/26th May, we had moved out of our positions to the west of the town to support Brauer's Group. The objective was a ridge, Point 296, which dominated the aerodrome. During the night we managed to get round the enemy's outpost line and to reach the high ground. For days we had been without sufficient water or food and were at the end of our strength. We lay down to rest on the ground. At about 0900 hrs we were attacked by a British unit. At first we could not have cared less – we were all so exhausted. But then, collecting out last reserves of energy, we stormed forward in a counter-attack and drove the enemy back.

'In this attack Peter fell and near me Hans-Christoph was wounded. We bandaged Hans-Christoph's knee as best we could and laid him under an olive tree near one of our comrades who had been blinded by a head wound. Convinced that our stretcher-bearers would find the wounded and bring them in, we carried on with the attack to capture the strategically important north side of the heights. By the afternoon we had reached the objective. There we heard of a brilliant piece of flying skill. A Ju 52 had landed on the



southern side on a plateau and flown off loaded up with wounded. We thought that our wounded comrades would be with that flight. Some years after the war I met Hans-Christoph in Munich and he told me his story. A story which cannot describe in a few short sentences what he suffered; of a man wounded and left behind in an attack. Badly wounded, not found and not rescued. The man lying near him soon died. In that heat the corpse began to decompose very quickly. Flies and the smell of decay sickened him. He collapsed into unconsciousness. When Heraklion was captured a miracle happened. Retreating British troops found Hans-Christoph and carried him to the south side of the island where he was given medical treatment and left to be picked up by our side. He was flown to Athens where his leg was amputated and for weeks his life hung in the balance. The doctors gave him no chance but he survived.

‘On the ridge which we had taken there was neither water nor cover from the blazing sun. Thirst was our constant companion. The wounded suffered terribly and to ease their sufferings we negotiated with our opponents. They took our wounded and looked after them, a humane action that has never been forgotten. As a result, when the fighting for Crete ended there was no tension, feeling of hate or problems with the blokes from the other side of No-Man’s Land (the soldiers’ term for our opponents). I look at the view from the summit of the ridge. We left it on 29th May, coming down to attack the town and the aerodrome. It was Whitsun and a miracle had happened; the enemy had pulled out. The fighting for Heraklion was over.

‘Before we fly home to Germany I go down to the beach once again. The helmet has fallen to pieces and has been cleared away by the beach sweepers. Our aircraft climbs steeply through the clouds and into the sunlight.’

## OPERATION ‘BARBAROSSA’

In the autumn of 1940, Adolf Hitler, unwilling and unable to attack Great Britain, turned his attention eastwards and determined to open a war against the Soviet Union. For a number of political and military reasons he considered that this would be a short campaign and that, in a matter of months, a ramshackle Communist Russia, defended by a Red Army which had shown itself as incompetent during the war against Finland, would be destroyed. Once the Soviet Union had been overthrown there would be a short period to re-equip and to re-arm the Forces after which Germany would turn westwards again and defeat the United Kingdom.

With the benefit of hindsight one can see that the planning and conduct of the new war were dangerously faulty. One of the principal reasons for the attack upon Russia, according to notes taken by the senior officers who

attended the Führer's briefing, was patently absurd. This was the need to capture so much territory that the cities of the Reich could not be bombed by the Red Air Force. This was a nonsense. Hitler was determined on war for political as well as economic reasons and to conduct it created three huge army groups. Von Leeb's Army Group North was to attack out of East Prussia in the general direction of Leningrad. Von Bock's Army Group Centre, the main striking force, was to advance out of Poland and smash through at Smolensk. Those two Army Groups would then combine to destroy the enemy in the Baltic areas. Von Rundstedt's Army Group South was to strike out of southern Poland and aim for the bend of the lower Dnieper. The plan was that the Army Groups would destroy the Red Army in western Russia and not allow it to escape into the vastness of the Soviet Union. All planning was predicated upon the fact that the Red Army must fight to hold the territory west of the Dnieper. The Germans saw this as strategically unavoidable for the Russians. General Marcks, one of the principal planning officers advanced the premise that, ' . . . the Russians cannot avoid a decision as they did in 1812. Modern armed forces of one hundred divisions cannot abandon their sources of supply. It is anticipated that the Russian Army will stand to do battle in a defensive position protecting Great Russia and the eastern Ukraine . . .' That the Red Army would stand and fight was seen by the German planners as a military imperative and when they did the three Army Groups would destroy them.

To bring about this great victory Hitler had laid down that ' . . . at most one hundred divisions would be fielded . . .' Such confidence is bewildering. The Führer, knowing his army to be numerically inferior to its new enemy, intended to deploy only marginally more divisions than had been put into the second stage of the campaign against France. Yet, France has an area of 50,000 square miles while the expanse of the Soviet Union in which the three Army Groups were to fight extends across about a million square miles. There was one vast area, the Pripet Marsh, which divided Army Groups North and Centre, but Hitler chose to ignore the danger of that terrain factor. He did not want the army to be bogged down in the Pripet but to strike eastwards in wide-ranging, destructive blows. Not that he had laid down a point of main effort, a firm objective which was to be attained. Rather, he intended his direction of the war to be flexible and chose, seemingly almost at random, objectives that he considered to be important.

Thus, the German Army, inferior in number to its enemy, was to advance into a country deficient in road and rail communications, was to fight along a battle front which ran for nearly two thousand miles and without any firm idea of what its true objectives were. There were no accurate maps of the country and many of those which were available carried misleading details. Overestimating the ability of their own forces while underestimating those of the Red Army, ignorant of Russia's weapons production, ignoring

terrain and communications difficulties, OKW, its subordinate commands of army, navy and airforce, as well as its supreme commander waited for the new D-Day. This was Sunday, 22 June 1941, and H-Hour was to be 0330.

Precise to the second, German artillery opened the first barrages and Luftwaffe aircraft, which had taken off well before H-Hour, struck at Red Air Force airfields. Behind that curtain of fire German infantry and panzer troops moved forward. The war which Josef Goebbels had claimed would make the world hold its breath had begun. Three million German soldiers, 600,000 vehicles, 3,580 panzers, 7,184 guns and 1,830 aircraft were put into the fight. So great a concentration of military might, backed by victories in three campaigns, must surely prevail. The new war would be over very soon and so confident were those in command that even the notoriously cautious Halder, wrote in his diary on 3 July 1941, on the 12th day of operations in the East: 'On the whole one can already claim that the orders we had been given, to smash the Russian Army in front of the Duna and Dnieper rivers have been carried out. I am in agreement with the statement made by a captured Russian General officer that, east of the Duna and Dnieper we shall have only remnants to defeat. It is not too much to say that the campaign in the East has been won within fourteen days.'

## THE LUFTWAFFE WAR

The role of the Luftwaffe in Operation 'Barbarossa', was the same as that which it had played in earlier campaigns. It was to destroy the Red Air Force on the ground and when this initial task had been accomplished the squadrons were then to support the army in the role of flying artillery. Several correspondents described the build-up of the Luftwaffe before the opening of 'Barbarossa' and the actions of that Service in the first weeks of the new war. I am indebted, chiefly, to Odilo Kummer and to J. Meyer, both of whom served in the early days of the war with Russia and from whose accounts, as well as from others, the following picture of the scene in the summer of 1941, has been compiled:

'The Luftwaffe was subordinated to the strategic aims of the army and was organized accordingly. For some reason the destruction of the Red Air Force both on the ground and in the air was not seen as a strategic but as a tactical operation which was to be completed quickly. After that the Luftwaffe would go on to what was considered the more important duty; to support the army's ground operations.

'Each of the three Army Groups had an attached Air Fleet and to cover any gaps in the battle line, special Commands were set up, each under the command of a Fliegerführer. For example Fliegerführer Baltic commanded the area between Luftflotte 1, attached to Army Group North and Luftflotte

5, the Norway Command. The Fliegerführer Baltic was given the task of ensuring air cover at the junction of those two Air Fleets. There was a similar grouping on the southern flank, and this was known as the Luftwaffe Mission to Roumania. It had two chief tasks: to cover the extreme right wing of Army Group South and to protect the oil fields at Ploesti. Luftflotte 4 was attached to Army Group South and Army Group Centre controlled Luftflotte 2.

“Thanks to high-altitude flights which had been carried out by special units from the end of December 1940, the Luftwaffe had a very good idea of the location of the principal airfields and of other targets in the western regions of the Soviet Union. Luftwaffe aircraft had, in fact, been flying over Russian air space well before the outbreak of war, and on the first day of “Barbarossa” its bombers had to take off before the declaration of war so as to be over Soviet airfields at H-Hour. Certain squadrons, selected to take part in the initial raids, were given intensive training in night flying. On D-Day they took off before H-Hour, flew high over the frontier region and then came down to bombing level by 0315 hrs, just as the first shells of the German artillery barrage were being fired. In those first missions no fewer than 637 bombers or Stukas and 231 fighters took part. Only two German aircraft failed to return.

‘According to unit war diaries on each and every Russian airfield which was attacked the enemy aeroplanes were drawn up in rows as if on parade. Surprise was everywhere total. Most bombers carried 2kg fragmentation bombs, which caused great damage to the parked aircraft. When the captured Red Air Force commanders were interrogated they revealed that they had known of our pre-war, high-altitude reconnaissance flights and that they had been warned of our air strike, but on orders from Stalin, Russian units had been forbidden to act provocatively and even normal air patrols had been reduced or stood down altogether. There were a few sectors where Russian fighters did take off during our first raids and engaged our aircraft in battle. In one of these a Soviet pilot who had used up his ammunition deliberately rammed one of our fighters and both pilots were killed. It was an early demonstration of how hard the battle in the skies would be fought. From the first to the last day the Red Air Force airmen fought, if not always with skill, then certainly with overwhelming and undisputed courage.

‘The first Russian aircraft to be destroyed in action was a Rata fighter at 0340 hrs and on other sectors more victories were being gained. During the first weeks of “Barbarossa” the initiative lay with the Luftwaffe and few Russian machines penetrated German air space, although towns in the German-occupied areas of Poland were bombed. When the first claims of Russian aircraft destroyed on the ground and in the air reached Luftwaffe headquarters they were disbelieved. Goering could not accept that 4,017 enemy aircraft had been destroyed in eight days and for a loss of only 15 German aircraft. Halder was no less sceptical and for a very good reason.

From estimates supplied by experts at OKW and OKL, the Red Air Force was thought to have on establishment about 6,000 aircraft. If the claims put in by squadrons were to be believed, this meant that the Russian Air Force had been reduced to just 2,000 machines. But that figure was obviously incorrect given the numbers of Russian aircraft which were being reported as intercepting German raids and carrying out bombing raids. A thorough sifting of post-battle reports made it clear that the Soviet Air Force operational strength was still considerably more than 2,000 aircraft. On the evidence available Red air strength at the opening of "Barbarossa" was not the 6,000 machines which had been estimated but was more likely to be in excess of 8,000 machines in western Russia alone. If that figure were the true one, the Red Air Force, even after the terrible losses it had suffered in the opening week of "Barbarossa", was still twice as strong as the Luftwaffe. It was a daunting prospect and thus, the intention to destroy the Soviet Air Force ". . . on the ground and in the air . . ." had not been realized despite the claim from OKL, that ". . . the timing of the air attacks against Russian airfields on the first day of operations was a total success".

Buoyed up by the euphoria that the Red Air Force had been destroyed on the ground and in the air, OKL switched the squadrons on to the second task; that of giving support to the army in the field. That change of emphasis gave the Red Air Force time to recover as well as the opportunity to regroup and to be resupplied with new aircraft and fresh pilots. Although the Soviet air arm was to be paralysed for several months the Germans had failed to destroy it totally and it rose again to become a potent force in the years of fighting which lay ahead.

The Kriegsmarine had no operational role to play in a war that would be fought on the Russian land mass, except to ensure that the Baltic remained a German sea. It was in the Atlantic that the German Navy was fighting its principal battles, both in submarine and in surface actions.

## SS DIVISION 'DAS REICH' ON THE BERESINA

On 4 July 1941, the OKW communiqué reported that the Beresina had been crossed. Among the formations which had passed over that historic river was the SS Division 'Das Reich', forming part of Guderian's Panzer Group Centre. The division's orders were to cross the Beresina and to cut off the Russians who according to reports were said to be fleeing in disorder. There were, by contrast, other reports which did not mention that the enemy was fleeing but spoke instead of bitter fighting against his repeated attacks. Impressions of the confused actions of those early battles were recorded by Oberscharführer Roman Geiger of the division's artillery regiment:

'Ushakova, lying on a long ridge, was a typical small Russian village running on a general line west to south-east. Some 200 metres outside the village there was a single, large tree visible from a very long way away. This was, if I remember correctly, known as Point 306.

'Our No 8 battery of the division's 2nd Artillery Regiment, took up position some 2 to 3 kms to the south-west of Ushakova, in support of infantry from our own division as well as from army units. The OP was manned by Untersturmführer Kindl, a signaller and a telephonist. It was the second day [in that position] and the Russians had been attacking without pause. Shellfire regularly cut the telephone line and over the radio Kindl asked for protection for the OP. Untersturmführer Schuelke ordered me, "Geiger, take a machine-gun and go forward to protect the OP and the infantry in Oshakova."

'My No 1 on the gun, Hasenkopf, took two boxes of ammunition and I carried the gun and we followed the telephone line. Although I did know from map coordinates where the OP was located, following the wire would bring us to the spot more quickly. We moved through the village which was under Russian artillery fire and infantry fire. The OP had been set up some 50 metres to the right of the large tree. Kindl waved to us and pointed out the position we were to take up in a ditch about 30 metres to his right. The "Black Sow", an 18cm Russian gun, began firing at the big tree on the ridge. Far away we could hear the soft thump as the gun fired, then 15 to 20 seconds later there would be a rushing sound and then a frightful explosion. The rate of fire was about one round every three or four minutes. The next shot landed about 10 metres from us. Then the Russian infantry began an attack. With the sun at my back I had good observation in an easterly direction and fired short bursts at them. But there was a small area of dead ground which I could not cover and the Russians worked their way forward through this until they were about 50 metres away. I could see their brown helmets shining in the sunlight. They got no farther forward than that. Kindl left the OP together with the wireless operator as it was impossible to give clear fire orders over the radio. He shouted out to me, "Do a good job, Geiger", as I flung the first egg grenades. By this time the fire of the "Black Sow", was being laid on the village itself and shells had begun to explode in the first houses. Once again that whistling sound was followed by a crashing explosion. Then there would be a pillar of smoke and when that had cleared away, there was nothing to be seen. Some houses were burning like tinder boxes. Untersturmführer Kindl was hit during the bombardment and lost a leg. He died on the way to the RAP. The signaller was killed immediately. I kept the Russians back with short bursts of fire and by throwing grenades. Our right flank was covered by marshy ground, so we had nothing to fear from that sector.

'Ushakova was now completely alight. There was the sound of rifle and machine-gun fire and shouts of "Oooooorah!" as the Russians stormed the village. It was time for me and my No 1 to get out. To our right and to our rear there was a piece of swampy, meadow land. We made our way back through this firing bursts of fire from the machine-gun and throwing grenades. Just as we were nearing the battery area we saw the last prime mover drive off towing its gun and disappearing in a cloud of dust. The battery had had to move because its position had become too dangerous. As we two made our way back to our unit we realized that there were wounded men lying in the side-cars of motor cycles.

'As a result of the furious Russian assaults our front line had collapsed. Then I saw an armoured car flying the "Reich" pennant. In the vehicle was our divisional commander, Obergruppenführer Hausser. I reported to him and he looked through his binoculars in the direction of Ushakova. It did not look all that good. Over the radio he ordered up the Stukas. That was comforting. An hour later, by which time Hasenkopf and I had reached the battery positions, the Stukas were on their way. Seven of them swung round in a great curve and gathered over the signal flares that were being fired to indicate targets. Less than a kilometre in front of our positions dive-bombers screamed down out of the sky with their sirens howling and plastered the enemy with bombs. It was frightening to think of that rain of fire. We supported the Stukas with all the shells we could fire off. For the rest of the day we were stood down but on the following day we went in with panzer and SPs and recaptured Ushakova.'

## THE DEFENCE OF SVERDLIKOVO VILLAGE

There were certain factors which set the Eastern Front apart from the campaigns which had preceded it. To begin with there was the vast length of the battle line and the numbers employed in the fighting. A second factor, developing from the first, were the encirclement battles, particularly those of the autumn of 1941. The tempo of the advance of the Panzer Groups, in this case that of von Rundstedt's Army Group South, broke through the Russian lines, outflanked the defenders and had soon surrounded whole Russian armies. The thin line of German panzer and motorized infantry – not yet known as Panzer Grenadiers – fought against the Red Army's frantic attempts to escape. Where the situation on the ground became very desperate and a Red breakthrough threatened, the Luftwaffe was called upon to carry out its support role. The following account by a war reporter with the SS Regiment 'Westland' describes the defence of a Russian village of Sverdlikovo by a handful of men of the Regiment and of a flak unit.

‘During the great battles of annihilation fought around Uman the Soviets sought to break out of our encirclement. Between Uman and Slatopol, in and around Sverdlikovo there were only weak German forces. During the night of 1st/2nd August, the Bolsheviks carried out a major assault which lasted 14 hours. The defeat of that breakout attempt by a German force which was outnumbered 80 to 1, played a significant part in winning the battle of Uman.

‘The night was too dark for the lieutenant in charge of the flak guns to see clearly. A recce patrol was his last hope. He realized how desperate would be the position of his unit if the enemy were to attack in strength. But he also knew that he had to fight to the last shell. He was isolated here with three light flak guns and a handful of infantry, and SS men dug in on the outskirts of the village. His orders were to hold out until the mass of the German infantry could reach and relieve him. It was a shocking night whose darkness was accentuated by driving rain. Everything was soaked through and wet uniforms clung to wet bodies. The ground was being turned to clinging mud in the downpour.

‘Suddenly there were bursts of machine-gun fire and rifle shots from close at hand. Bullets struck the sides of the armoured vehicles and between the curses, cries and shouts came the call “Lieutenant!, lieutenant!” It was the leader of the recce patrol who reported that the Reds had already occupied the south-west edge of Sverdlikovo and were moving deep into the village under the protection of armour. The officer made a quick decision. “Bring back the guns to the centre of the village and group round the little bridge across the stream. We shall hold out there for as long as the ammunition lasts.” Barely had the half-track vehicles begun to move when a storm of artillery fire crashed down upon the village and enemy hand-grenades began to explode close by. “Its high time, men,” called the young officer. “Back to the bridge and we’ll stop them there.” From the edge of Sverdlikovo, where they had been standing only a few minutes earlier, there was a thunder of shellfire, machine-gun bursts, mortar bomb explosions and the animal cries of “Hoooooray!, hooray!”, as the Red infantry attacked some German unit isolated there. And above all that confusion signal flares rise into the night sky; white, red, yellow and green. The approach of a Russian tank was the signal for a general assault upon the group. Every Red Army weapon in the village seemed to be turned against the gunners and the SS men. Streams of yellow, green, white and red tracer whizzed all around them, pattering against the steel sides of the vehicles like a rain storm. Three and a half hours that storm of steel lasted and for all that time the gunners could only reply with rifle shots fired into the darkness. The guns could not be brought into action. Slowly the enemy closed in on the bridge but at last the light of dawn allowed the lieutenant to identify the shapes of enemy



soldiers setting up anti-tank guns and mortar positions. Now his little command could take effective counter-action. The officer took up the post of aimer on one of the guns and selected a target. "Magazine!" he calls. "In place!" comes the reply from the second gun and then both open up on the Soviets advancing toward the bridge. The other men of the flak unit open up with rifles and pistols on the enemy now only a bare 150 metres away. Under the fire of the two light flak guns the first line of Soviet soldiers was swept away. But new waves of them, earth brown, screaming figures stormed across the little stream and made for the bridge. At first in company strength and then by battalions they storm forward with fanatical determination to take the bridge. The living climb over the bodies of their dead comrades in their eagerness to attack the Germans.

'It is soon clear to the lieutenant that however good his aim is there are so many enemy soldiers advancing that it will be only a matter of time before the position is lost. Rifle fire coming from a number of directions also shows that his unit is surrounded. Well, he will do his duty to the last and gives orders that the vehicles are to be driven right on to the bridge. There the last stand will be made. Then, as if by a miracle, the enemy fire from the rear dies away and German helmets can be seen on the hills behind the flak unit. A Company of "Westland" has broken through to reinforce the little group. With this reinforcement, small though it is, the lieutenant decides to recapture the village. Led by the flak vehicles the infantry storm forward. The guns fire at demonic speed and pump shells into the huts of the village. Enemy counter-fire strikes at the little groups storming their way through Sverdlikovo. At places there is bitter hand-to-hand fighting and the Red Army men fight with fanatical bravery.

'Suddenly the houses on both sides of the narrow street begin to burn. Four hours the fighting lasted before the centre of the village was cleared of the enemy. But the situation for the German soldiers is as hopeless as before. Masses of Russian troops have been brought forward and have now completely surrounded Sverdlikovo. Then the German infantry report that they are running out of ammunition. An enemy mortar has taken up position in the bed of the stream and begins to range in on the crossroads where the lieutenant's gun is in action. "Quickly!; fire on the hill over there!", but not a shot is fired. Everybody is astonished at the sight of hundreds of Red Army men charging down a hill only 250 metres distant, running, stumbling and falling. They are firing from the hip and seem to be totally disorganized. Can it be that their commissars are driving them into the fight? The moment of surprise passes and the guns open up again. The attack collapses. The shortage of ammunition is now critical and the half-tracks are driven so as to form a circle. Orders are given to fire only when the enemy is so close that every shot will strike a target. One of the prisoners, a Roumanian who speaks German, says that on the hills and in the bed of the stream there are

hundreds of Russian dead. In reply to the question of how strong the Red Army units are around the village, the prisoner gives the answer, "Five regiments".

'At last, when all ammunition has been used and the flak guns have only a magazine or two left, the German troops outside the village break through and Sverdlikovo is systematically cleared, an operation that takes so long that it seems almost as if the village will never be free of the enemy. By midday it is finally and firmly in German hands. Later that day the Soviets mount another series of attacks but these are broken up by infantry fire and then totally destroyed by Stuka attack.'

The bitterness with which the Red Army fought and the efforts it made to defend or capture some obscure village, worried the German commanders and men alike. The 20th Panzer Division's report included the bitter comment, "Experience shows that to capture a village costs us 60 men"; and western Russia was covered with little villages. The drain upon German infantry strength was alarming and yet, as 4th Panzer Division reported, "Panzer without infantry protection cannot be used to clear wooded areas." It was a problem which was to grow more difficult to resolve as the war continued and losses mounted.

## STUKA UNIT 'HUNTING AT WILL'

Following upon the successful destruction of the Uman pocket, Army Group South roared on a hundred miles past the flanks of South West Front and on to Konotop. At that point it was planned that Panzer Group 2 would drive southwards to meet the rising thrust of Panzer Group 1. Within those jaws would be trapped no fewer than five Red Armies. The length of front that was being covered, as has already been explained, created difficulties for the ground forces which were too few in numbers to hold back the Red Army's break-out attempts at every point. When that pressure grew too great Luftwaffe units were called in to support the army. The following account is of a Stuka unit serving with Army Group South:

'Our task was to fly missions to destroy the enemy's tanks, lorried columns, fortified defences and artillery positions. The enemy was making a wild attempt to bring his troops across the Dnieper in an effort to avoid encirclement and yet, at the same time, was sending reinforcements into the area in an attempt to hold back that encirclement.

'Our Stuka squadron was put in to substitute for the panzer formations which were fighting against the Red Army's giant machines on another sector. We in the squadron were aware of our responsibility. In continual missions from dawn to last light we opened the way forward for our own troops and smashed breaches in the wall of Red armour. Our squadron had

hardly returned from a mission east of Boguslav when we were tanked up and loaded with bombs. We were to join with the other seven squadrons of our Wing in carrying out fresh operations. There was no time to discuss tactics. There was not much point because it was the same sort of mission we had been flying over the past days. "Hunting at will in the area of Boguslav-Jachny." In other words we can attack any target we choose – and we know there will be plenty to choose from. We line up for the take-off. The engine roars and the pressure of take-off forces me forward. To the right and left the other comrades of the squadron have already left the ground. The sky is filled with Ju 87s. As one squadron leaves on a mission another is landing after carrying out its task and we know that another will be over the target area.

"There is a quarter of an hour's flying time to the target area and then through the earphones comes a message from one of the returning squadron. "Achtung! Strong concentrations of armour about 3kms east of Jachny." The message is repeated. Now we know our objective and the squadron turns towards the new target area. We identify it while still some way away. Fires are everywhere – burning villages and vehicles. As yet we are too far away to identify tanks. Then, we are over the target area, a landscape of gently rolling hills and valleys. On the footpaths which criss-cross it there are Russian tanks, hard to detect because they are cleverly camouflaged. Our own troops lining the railway embankment fire off Very lights to show their positions. It is clear that the Russians intend to drive towards the embankment and to overrun our men.

'Like hawks we circle over the target area and then we detect the enemy armour. There are not just twenty or thirty tanks but nearly a hundred of the 52-ton monsters. Some are camouflaged with sheaves of corn or bushes. Between their rows are gun lines and then trenches in which Red infantry are waiting to attack. To the rear of the Russian assault group are fuel and ammunition lorries. We have excellent targets. The Squadron Leader gives the signal to attack and immediately the pilot puts our plane into a steep dive. We dive and dive, towards the enemy. As the pilot makes last-minute adjustments I look out and see our target, a group of five tanks moving away at high speed. The pilot corrects the direction by a fraction and then there is a slight jump as the first bombs are released. We pull out of the dive and I feel the G-force pulling at my face and body for just a fraction of a second. Then everything is normal again. I open fire with my machine-gun upon the enemy on the ground below as we climb and gain height. Our comrades are diving towards their targets so that every few seconds a bomb explodes among the enemy concentration. I look to see the effect of our attack. One tank has suffered a direct hit, but what has happened to the other four machines? Two are close to the dead tank, probably suffering from the effects

of blast or shrapnel upon the tracks or suspension, but the remaining two are still moving. We dive again, annoyed that our bombs do not score a direct hit each time. But one of the tanks is smothered in smoke. It is burning. The fifth gets away. Then we bomb the soft-skin vehicles.

'It must be hell down there. Burning tanks and lorries cover the ground, and flames from the burning villages threaten the tanks concealed nearby. We have no more bombs to drop but fly over the enemy at low level firing our machine-guns. It is surprising how much material the Russians have ready to put into action. Tanks and lorries and thousands of soldiers ready to take the places of those whom our attacks have destroyed. It is frightening to realize just what masses of men and material the enemy has at his disposal.

'On our flight home we meet three squadrons which are directed on to the target we have just left. And so it goes on – a succession of attacks until nightfall. It was worth it. Our squadron alone has destroyed 62 tanks and over 200 trucks. Our attacks have smashed the enemy's break-out attempts. And so it goes on day in day out from 9th to 16th August, until the battle ends and our ground forces finally capture Kanev.'

## THE RENEWED POWER OF CAVALRY

Other unique factors of the Eastern Front were the terrain and climatic conditions which Second Panzer Army, in a report dated 18 November, described as, 'being outside our previous experience'. Another contrast between 'Barbarossa' and the campaigns which preceded it was that western Europe had extensive and sophisticated road and rail systems. Russia lacked both. So dependent did German units fighting in Russia become upon the rail link that 3rd Panzer Division in a commentary on the fighting reported that '. . . troops are bound to the railway and have to be within horse and cart or horse and sledge distance of it'.

There were several reasons for this. One was that vast distances and the lack of roads meant a reliance upon horses because the German Army had insufficient trucks to maintain lorried movement. Another reason was that any German supply column was liable to be intercepted and destroyed by detachments of Russian cavalry which infiltrated through the loose, German defensive zones and which then harassed the rear areas. The dependence upon horses was another feature of the Russian front, a dependence which was great in the summer months but which was crucial to movement of supplies during the winter period. By comparison with Britain, whose military transport was motorized and whose guns were towed by portee, the German Army depended to a great deal upon cattle to move its guns and carts. The image of armoured columns carrying out deep penetrating thrusts

is a familiar one, but does not show that those panzer spearheads were often many miles ahead of their own forces and that frequently they were isolated and unsupported even by their own lorried infantry.

One Panzer Division officer wrote in an analysis of operations: ‘. . . infantry regiments of panzer divisions are lorry-mounted but, given the road conditions in the Soviet Union, it is often impossible for them to keep pace [with the armour]. The establishment of motor vehicles in panzer divisions is too low and thus [in encirclement battles] it is necessary to call upon infantry divisions for support. These have to footmarch to the objectives and their transport is, in the main, horse-drawn.’

It may well be that Hitler, who hated with equal passion horses and the horse-riding aristocracy, was determined to make the German Army a completely motorized one. Certainly he reduced the cavalry establishment of the army to a single brigade whose two regiments served with distinction in the 1940 campaign in France. But it was on the Eastern Front that the German Army first came to realize that it was absolutely dependent upon the horsed regiments which it no longer had on establishment. The brigade that had fought in France went on to achieve a number of successes in the Pripet Marsh and as a consequence was expanded to achieve divisional status. This was followed by a fresh order to break up the division. Its major formations were stood down but the smaller units which had been serving away from the division at the time of the order did not disband. Instead, as the importance of cavalry was appreciated, these became the cadres around which new detachments were created. Then more and more cavalry units were raised. The German Army became so dependent upon horses that two and a half million animals were on its establishment in Russia. Another statistic was that, on the Eastern Front, a thousand horses died each day. The greatest number of these were killed by shellfire or by bullets, but a great many died of disease or of heart failure. The Eastern Front was a murderous place for cattle as well as for the soldiers. Although armoured operations are the accepted image of the Russian front, there were many areas in which horses were used *en masse*, particularly by the Red Army. A number of former soldiers described how their units had been attacked by Russian cavalry. These stories were so similar in content that I have amalgamated them to form a single narrative.

‘As early as the encirclement battles in the autumn of 1941, we became aware of several frightening elements; the Red Army’s manpower reserves, the rigidity of thought of its commanders and men and the stoicism of the rank and file. There can have been few units of the German Army which served on the Russian Front, that did not have experience of clashes with Cossack cavalry. Often these were patrols of four or five riders who charged out of woods or maize fields. Or else they were company-strength detachments, which struck quickly and disastrously at units that had grown

careless. It was during the autumn battles of 1941, that massed Red Army cavalry tried to smash a hole in our lines so that Russian armies which we had trapped could break out of our encircling ring.

‘One day, either the 15th or 16th September 1941, we had seen cavalry, small groups to begin with but whose numbers grew as the morning wore on. Early in the morning there had been a mist hanging low over the fields and in the vast woodland area to our front. We were waiting for another infantry division to pass through us and go on to clear the Ivans from the woods. With that mist hanging about it would not be an easy task. We had had the order to stand down even though visibility was poor and despite the fact there was the noise of tanks moving about in the mist in front of our trenches. We in the rifle companies were on open ground with battalion headquarters and the Heavy Weapons Company in a village behind us. It would have been about a couple of hours later, say about 10 a.m., when the sun dispersed the mist and produced a fine, warm morning. Nothing much seemed to be going on when suddenly we were called to arms. An artillery observer on the roof of a hut in the village had seen about seventy horsemen trotting out of the forest towards us. The FOO had also alarmed his battery and a troop of guns opened fire. The riders raced back through the shellfire into the shelter of the trees. Then a group of T-34s rolled towards the village and came under fire. Two were knocked out and the others drove away. The joy we felt at that little victory was premature because it soon became clear that the Reds had only been feeling out our strength and fire discipline.

‘For about another hour there was no movement or sound and it was hard to believe that there was a war going on and that we were part of a cordon flung round a huge mass of Soviet divisions. The pocket was a huge one – 150 kilometres long and about 70 deep, and for the past days we had had to face probes by Red Army infantry, and on this morning only the cavalry and tank probing assaults. Nothing of consequence, really. It would have been nearly midday when more cavalry were seen threading their way through the trees. We had excellent vision of the ground over which they were advancing and a good field of fire. Other horsemen were seen coming out of the small ravines [a feature of the terrain]. There was no shot fired by the battery which was supporting us and we wondered why the FOO was not firing at this splendid target. Then we saw that whole squadrons had come out of the woods and were forming up. The squadrons became battalions and the battalions, regiments. The Russian cavalry deployed and began to trot towards our trenches.

‘We made ready to open fire and as the line of horses broke into a gallop, the shells of our artillery crashed around them. I was an NCO observer on a medium machine-gun and saw clearly behind the first line of horsemen, that there was a second and then a third line. The intervals between the lines was wide and it was not a matter of a single charge which we would have to

meet, but three separate charges. We infantry opened up and in a little time the first line of cavalry had been almost wiped out. Over the bodies of their comrades and across the thrashing limbs of the wounded horses the second line came on. They reached no farther than about 200 metres past the first line when they, too, were destroyed. The third line gained a little more ground but was crushed by our artillery and machine-guns.

'I can never forget the sight of horses and riders being blown into the air by shellfire and seeing blood pouring from wounded animals, mad with fear as they galloped across our positions. Cease fire was ordered and we went out to attend to the wounded Russians and to put down the horses. It was a miserable afternoon. According to the Intelligence Officer the prisoners we took told him that the attack had been made by an entire Red Army cavalry division and should have been supported by a regiment of tanks. The armour had not made the rendezvous by H-Hour and the divisional commander had decided to postpone the attack until the tank regiment did arrive. His decision was overruled by the commissar who believed us to be too weak to withstand a cavalry charge and who had insisted that it take place. The purpose of the attack had been to carve a way through so that the trapped units facing us would escape and link up with other Red Army units fighting on the outside of the pocket. As it was the Reds had lost the best part of an entire division but had gained nothing. The men in the squadrons had seen their comrades killed but had still charged with determination and courage. Our battalion had four men wounded.'

In the area of Army Group South, according to Curzio Malaparte, an Italian war correspondent, a Hungarian hussar regiment mounted a cavalry charge against a Red Army infantry unit which was holding out and refusing to surrender. German infantry attacks against the entrenched Russians had been bloodily repulsed. Panzer assaults had been flung back with loss. Even the terrifying Stukas could not shake the determined Red Army men. The colonel of the Honved Hussar Regiment, seeing that the attacks were halted, asked the reason, was given details and promptly offered help. This was accepted. He formed his regiment into two lines and with himself at the centre of the first line swept down upon the Red Army defenders. Those men, who had resisted the most modern weapons of war, broke and ran when faced with the infantryman's oldest enemy, the horsed soldier. As the Hussar colonel said, 'I have trained for twenty years for this moment. It was the opportunity of a lifetime and one not to be missed.'



*Above: Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering, Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe.*

*Top right: Goering and senior commanders of the Luftwaffe on the Channel coast discussing plans for the air offensive against Britain.*

*Right: Werner Mölders, one of the Luftwaffe's fighter aces during the Battle of Britain.*







*Above: The first elements of Rommel's Afrika Korps marching through Tripoli, North Africa, in February 1941.*



*Left: General Wilhelm List, who commanded Twelfth Army during the campaign in Yugoslavia and Greece.*

*Below: Men of a Gebirgsjäger regiment shelter from the bitter weather while waiting to attack the Metaxas Line during the opening of the Greek campaign in 1941.*



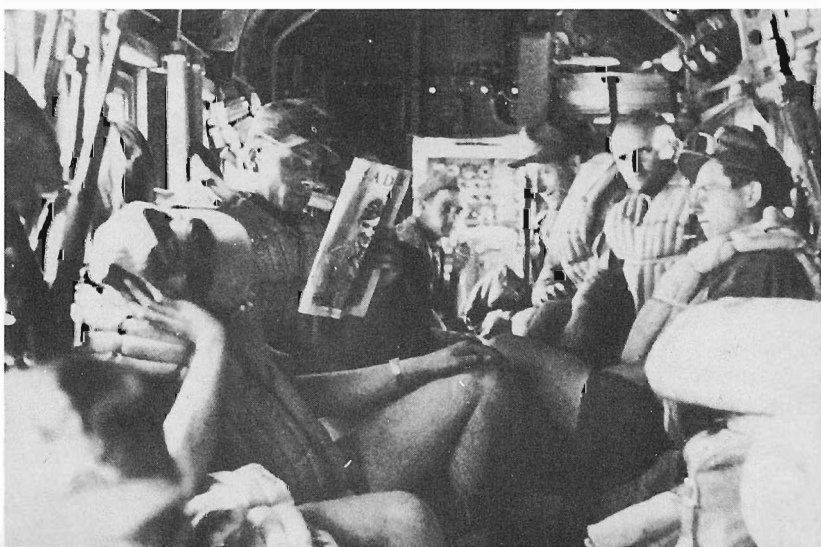
*Right: A bunker on the Metaxas Line after its capture by men of 5th Gebirgs (Mountain) Division.*



*Right: Gebirgsjäger pursuing the retreating Anglo-Greek armies, seen here passing through the pass of Thermopylae, scene of the epic stand by Leonidas and his Spartans.*



*Right: Alpine troops of 5th Gebirgs Division wait on a Greek airfield to be airlifted to Crete.*





*Above left: Ringel, General of Mountain Troops, who commanded the 5th Mountain Division during the Crete campaign in May 1941.*

*Above: Men of the Para Assault Regiment move into Maleme after capturing Point 107, the hill dominating the airfield on Crete.*

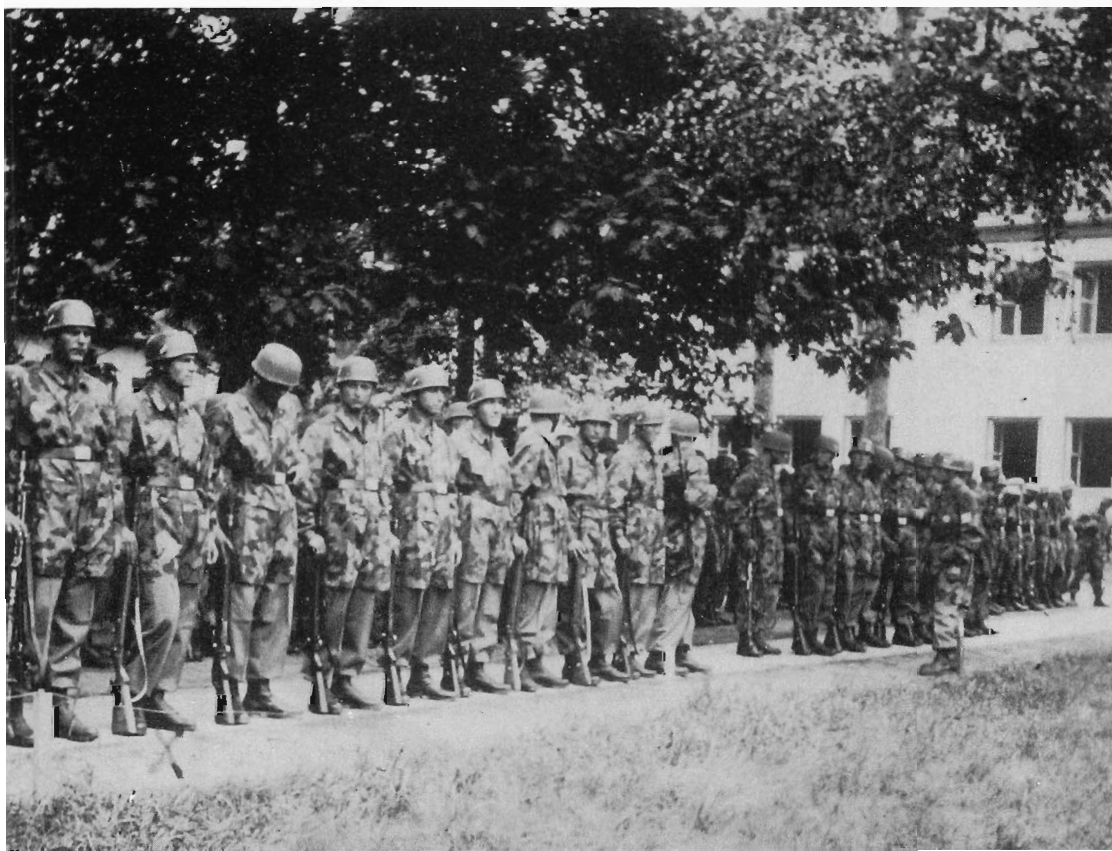
*Left: German paratroops killed during the fighting for Heraklion, Crete, in May 1941. The positions held by the Fallschirmjäger were in the line of trees in the background; note the parachutes in the olive tree.*

*Below: A German paratrooper moving through the ruins of Heraklion.*

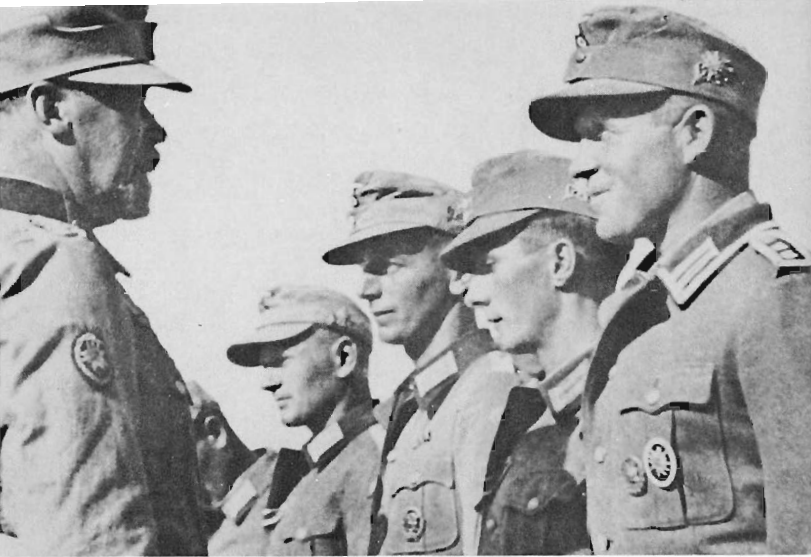
*Top right: Jubilant German paratroopers move into Heraklion.*

*Bottom right: In August 1941 a parade was held in Berlin to celebrate the victory in Crete. This picture shows Adolf Strauch (marked with a cross) and his comrades in the Hermann Goering barracks forming up for the parade.*





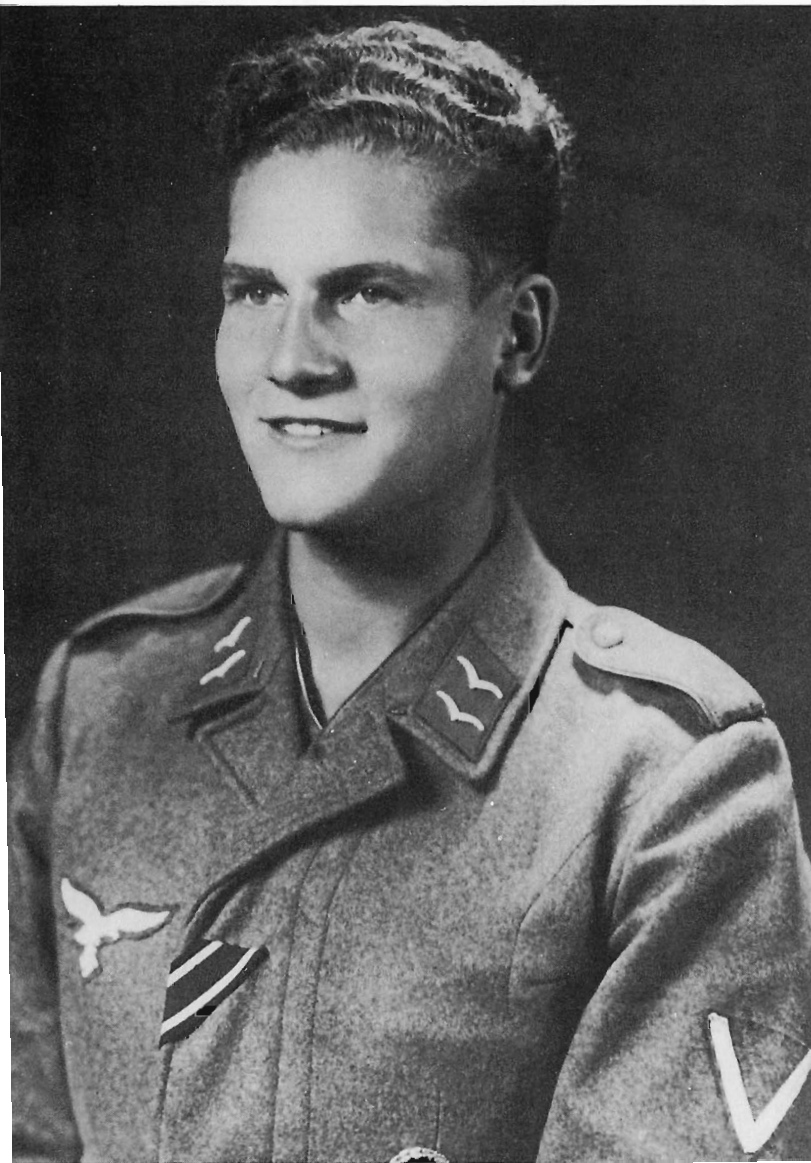




*Left: Ringel, General Officer Commanding 5th Gebirgs Division, presenting decorations and awards to men of his division at the end of the Crete campaign.*

*Right: The Reichs War Flag is hoisted over the Acropolis in Athens following the city's capture.*

*Far right: A German paratrooper's grave outside the field hospital at Tsalikaki, Crete.*

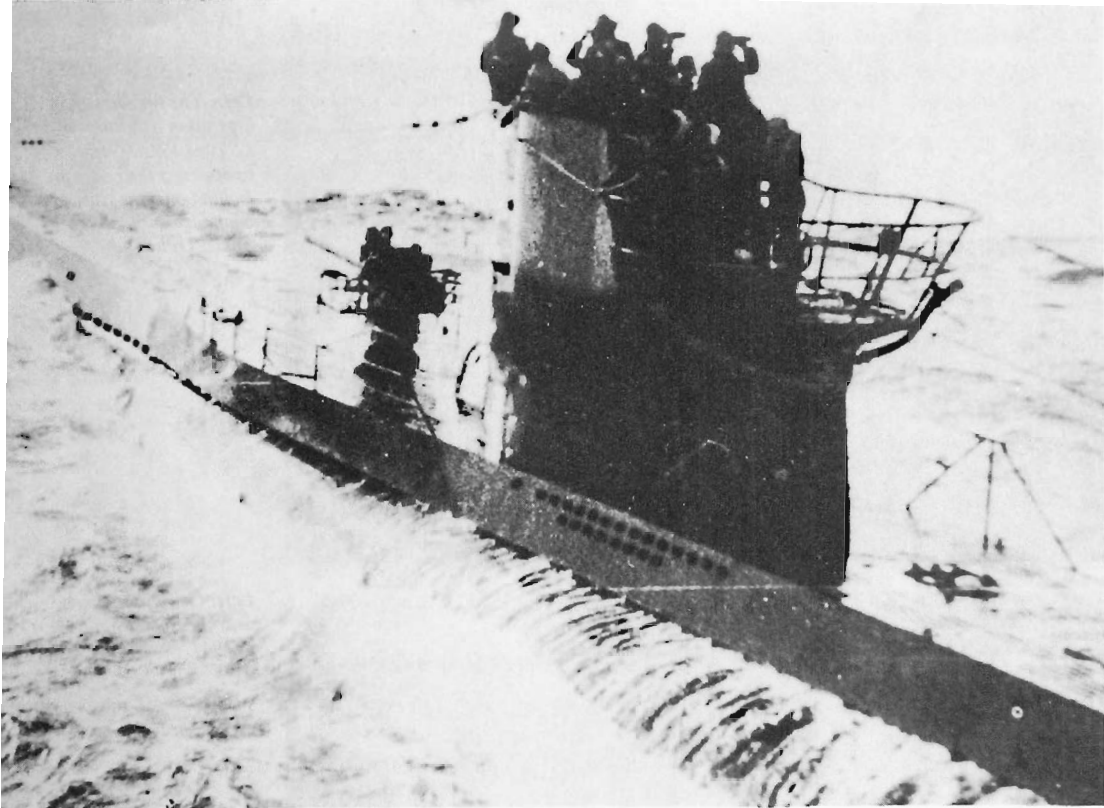


*Left: Adolf Strauch, qualified paratrooper and holder of the Iron Cross, Second Class. He fought in Greece, Crete, Russia, and north-west Europe.*

*Right: German paratroops using a captured British lorry in Heraklion.*







*Far left, top: Lütjens who led the Bismarck break-out attempt. He went down with his ship in May 1941.*

*Top left: Friedrich August Freiherr von der Heyde, battalion commander in the Fallschirmjäger, leading his men through Braunschweig in July 1941.*

*Bottom left: Look-outs keep watch from the conning tower of a U-boat in the Atlantic while a*

*British tanker burns in the background.*

*Above: A U-boat running on the surface in the Atlantic, 1941.*

*Below left: Grossadmiral Karl Doenitz who succeeded Raeder as Supreme Commander of the German Navy.*

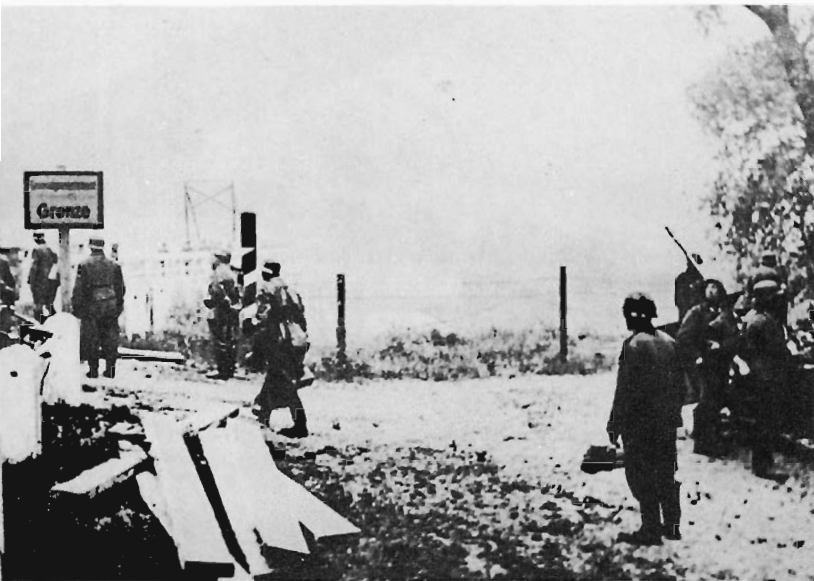
*Below: A propaganda photograph of a U-boat commandant and his coxswain on the voyage home after a long patrol at sea.*







*Left: The first day of Operation 'Barbarossa' 22 June 1941. German troops cross the bridge in Poland over the river boundary with the Soviet Union.*



*Left: German soldiers near the Soviet frontier in 1941.*

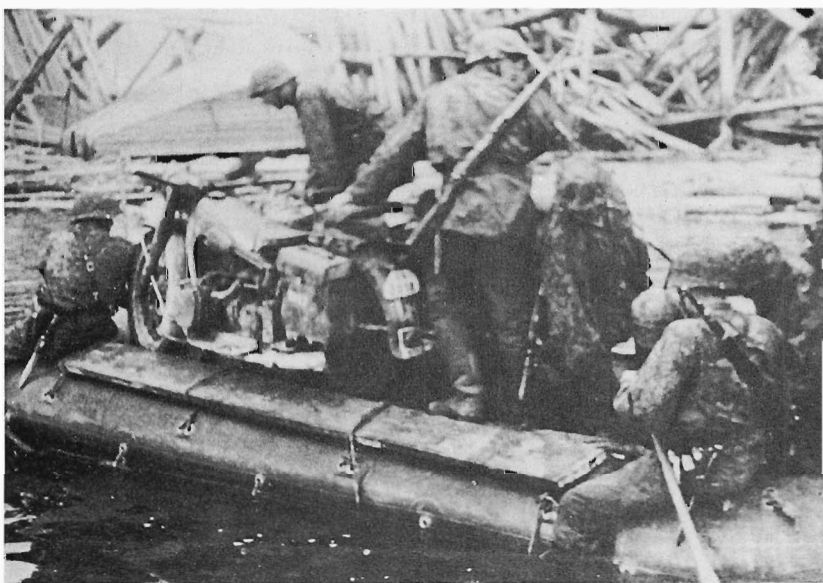


*Left: A German infantry advance during the early days of the Russian campaign. Owing to the absence of railways and a shortage of trucks, the mass of the invading force followed the Panzer divisions on foot.*

*Right: General Guderian, commanding a Panzer Group, with his subordinates at a battlefield conference.*



*Right: Men of SS Panzer Division Das Reich crossing a Russian river in summer 1941.*



*Right: Men of No.12 Company, Deutschland Regiment of SS Division Das Reich, in house-to-house fighting during the autumn advances in Russia.*





*Left: Deutschland Regiment of SS Division Das Reich in a forward position along the River Volga during the winter of 1941/2.*

*Bottom left: The extremes of cold experienced on the Eastern Front deeply affected the German troops, who, wherever possible, warmed themselves at fires as in this picture.*

*Below: A tank-busting team of the Waffen SS. The soldier leaning against the knocked-out T-34 holds in his hand a Teller mine for use in close action combat against enemy armour.*





*Above: The losses suffered by the Red Army in desperate attacks against the Germans were frighteningly high, but their sacrifices gained time for Stavka to organize a proper defence and bring up reinforcements.*

*Right: Men of Deutschland Regiment holding the line at Sytshevka in the winter of 1942.*







*Above: These men of Meindl's divisional headquarters defence company were regrouped to form the divisional reserve to be used in counter-attacks and spearheading assaults upon Russian defensive positions.*



*Left: An SS soldier dressed for winter weather talking to the driver of a locomotive in Russia.*



*Above: Dead German paratroopers near Ivanovka, along the River Mius.*

*Right: The battle line occupied by Meindl's men in northern Russia had several dangerous salients. These he straightened out in a number of short, sharp shock operations. Here he briefs a battle group before it leaves on such an operation in February 1942.*



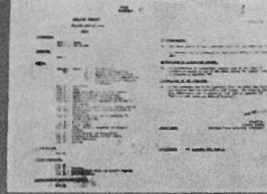
*Right: SS General 'Sepp' Dietrich with Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler on the Eastern Front in 1942.*



# Teine Rinne ...

"Chicago Sun" 31. augustil 1941:  
 "Kõne peale Churchill'i tegevussõnadumist Meelävest onni, Stalin' tungivale poolele abitaanitskaks lüües  
 rahuldav võitlus."

"American Journal" 20. augustil 1942:  
 "Meie ja inglased tungima Prantsusmaale. Elna Saclini"



ja selle lõpp  
**Dieppe**



*Above: The failure of the Allied landing at Dieppe was a propaganda coup for the Germans, who produced posters and placards detailing the extent of the defeat and circulated them throughout Europe.*

*Left: Girls of the Luftwaffe Signal Corps on a sight-seeing tour of the Acropolis in 1942. Girls such as these were later seconded to anti-aircraft batteries.*

## TICHWIN: THE KEY TO LENINGRAD

One area in which horses could have been used to advantage in the opening phases of the war with Russia was the flat and swampy ground into which Army Group North was advancing. That Army Group had the Leningrad region as its objective, but it was not to take the city – Hitler had no intention of wasting good men on house-to-house fighting. He intended, instead, to cut off the city and starve the beleaguered inhabitants to death. Artillery and air raids would destroy the buildings so that those Russians who did not starve would freeze to death in the ruins.

One of the units of Army Group North was 12th Panzer Division. On 19 October, this formation was given the task of capturing the town of Tichwin. The Soviet Union's poor railway system made Tichwin strategically important for whichever side held it controlled the railway line to Lake Ladoga, the shipping to Leningrad and thus the rations for the people of that city. The terrain was swampy and to bring the armour forward special corduroy roads had had to be constructed in many areas. It was ideal terrain for horsed operations, but one for which panzers were useless. As 12th Panzer crossed its start-line snow began to fall – several weeks early. It was a bad omen. It was more than just bad – it was frightening for those who realized the implications. The German Army was not prepared for winter conditions. No warm clothing had been issued nor were the weapons and vehicles prepared for the difficulties to come. The Division's experiences were described by Alexander Stahlberg:

‘Somehow or the other we reached Tichwin. From the archives I have established that it must have been on 8 November 1941. In the town there had been little resistance. Why should there have been? Once inside Tichwin, we were rats caught in a trap. The little town had been evacuated. There was not a soul to be seen. In a dead silence the troops began to prepare the defence. A deadly quiet lay over the little market square which was now deep in snow. The infantry dug in quickly, our guns vanished into cover. The tanks hid themselves in barns and cow stalls. Holes were made in the walls through which their guns would fire. Tichwin had now become a “fortress” and the 12th Panzer Division, which had been trained for mobile warfare, was now entrenched. Who was responsible for such an order?

‘We had captured Tichwin, as we had been told to do and we had cut the railway line. But only a few days later we found out from reconnaissance patrols that the Russians, by employing thousands of soldiers and civilians, had built a new road to the north of Tichwin and that that road was beyond the range of our guns . . . In the meantime the Russians, as was to be expected, had surrounded Tichwin . . . and used us as target practice. Worse yet was the effort of trying to maintain our line of communication to the Volkov. Supplies had to be either escorted by armed units or rescued by



them from Russian attack. Taking back the wounded was the worst. The Russians did not respect the huge red crosses painted on our ambulances.

‘One day I saw one of the Baltic aristocrats who was serving with us. His head was covered with a huge fur hat and in place of regulation leather jackboots he was wearing felt boots. In reply to the Colonel’s question, “Where did you get that stuff?”, he replied, “In the town, and in my cart I have more.” The Baltic aristocrat with experience of Russian winters had organized a collection of winter clothing. He knew that without furs and felt boots one could not last out in a winter in northern Russia.

‘Of course, all of us, officers and men, were still wearing the clothing and equipment with which we had crossed the frontier on 22nd June. We had not received one item of winter clothing. Sentries on duty had to be relieved at short intervals, by day as well as by night. The thermometer was already showing 20 degrees below and our Balt told us that it would get still colder. Whatever clothing was found in Tichwin was immediately confiscated . . . The winter did, indeed, become colder . . . To camouflage our vehicles we buried them in the snow. The lorries could not be used in their proper role and thus became instead a form of heating apparatus. Their motors were kept running the whole time – day and night. Eventually, fuel supplies began to run out, so we had to cut down on our “heating”. But once an engine had not been used for some time it was difficult to get it going again. To save the batteries the engines were warmed before being started up. To do this we filled tin cans with diesel oil, lit them and placed them under the vehicle. But every driver kept enough fuel in reserve for the time when we might have to retreat. There were more cases of frostbite every day. Feet, hands, ears, noses. What caused us most concern was looking after the wounded. If frost got into an open wound the man was unlikely to be saved. It was better to be dead than to be wounded. In all of us, from the simplest private to the commander, doubts began to nag, but we comforted ourselves with the thought that “those up there” would have taken note of the mistakes that had been made and would avoid them in future. There was nothing else we could do but grit our teeth and not give up hope . . .

‘We did not think that the order to withdraw would ever come because the German Army had not retreated at all in this war. Would Tichwin be the end of us? Then, at last came the order to pull back – late but at least before the Russians would have a chance to attack us . . . I can remember little of that retreat. I was conscious for only a few moments at a time. Suddenly I had a high fever, but did not know then, nor have I found out since, what the illness was. I was wrapped in blankets and placed on a tracked prime mover . . . I can remember sounds of battle, of orders being given, but had no interest in anything any more. At one time, and this I recall with terrible clarity, I took a blanket away from my face and saw around me piles of bodies. Wounded comrades. They sat, lay, or slumped huddled all around

me while on the tailboard of our prime mover lay the dead. No! they did not lie there, they were stacked there and tied on with rope. Our soldiers would not leave one dead comrade behind in the snow. For as long as it was possible they loaded them on to the vehicle. The mound behind us grew daily higher and higher. It may well be that that mound of dead saved my life, because some of those who had fallen must have been hit by the bullets which might otherwise have struck me. I came to my senses again in about the last days of the year. The unit had crossed the Volkov and the doctor told me I had pulled through and that I was in a village to the south-west of Leningrad. I had missed Christmas and while I had been unconscious Hitler had dismissed the Supreme Commander of the Army and had taken the job himself. Another surprise was to learn that Hitler had told a cheering audience in the Sportpalast in Berlin that he had declared war on America. It was clear that we were in the hands of a madman.'

## THE SIEGE OF MOSCOW

The SS Division, 'Das Reich', on the establishment of Army Group Centre, had been in the thick of the fighting for Moscow. The division had been fighting without relief or pause since it crossed the Beresina at the beginning of July. Five months later the division was buoyed up with the firm belief that one final offensive would capture the Russian capital. The loss of Moscow might not bring the war immediately to an end, but it would help to bring about the end of the Soviet regime. Heid Ruehl, serving with the 'Deutschland' Regiment of 'Das Reich' Division wrote of the fighting in the weeks before Christmas 1941.

'On 30 November, after hard fighting, the 3rd Battalion [of Deutschland Regiment] managed to capture the station and the factory in the north of Stalino. On the previous day the regiment's 2nd and 3rd Battalions, supported by the assault guns, "Blücher", "Lützow" and "Derfflinger", had captured Kryokovo after bitter fighting against a determined enemy. Losses to the battalions had been heavy. During the fighting the CO of 3rd Battalion, Hauptsturmführer Kroger was shot and killed by a bullet in the head fired at close range. While "Deutschland" was consolidating on its objectives, heavy losses of the past weeks made it imperative for 3rd Battalion to be broken up in order to raise the strength of the other two battalions. The survivors of 3rd Battalion were thereupon incorporated into the 1st and 2nd Battalions.

'On 2 December, the advanced guard of "Deutschland" regiment was directly facing Lenino. After forming up on either side of the Rochdestven-Lenino road the battalions moved off into the attack. In the woods to the west of the town, both battalions had their way obstructed by strong Russian

trench systems and were soon involved in heavy fighting. At the same time heavy barrages of mortar fire came in and the bombs exploding in the tree tops inflicted heavy casualties among which were a great many officers including the regimental commander, Schulz, and the COs of both battalions. The regimental commander and the CO of 2nd Battalion both refused to leave the field and led their units until nightfall. Fighting for Lenino went on until late in the night. To begin with only certain areas could be taken but at 2300 hrs the 2nd Battalion received orders to attack Lenino from the west and to take it regardless of cost. The SPs went in with No 6 Company but found the enemy had fled. He had pulled out during the night. Lenino was taken and secured. By gaining that place we had reached an outer suburb of Moscow – only 17 kms from the city centre. Lenino was a terminus of the Moscow bus line. In clear weather it would be possible to see the towers of the Kremlin. My God, how close we were to this historic objective. Then on 3rd December, Panzer Group 4, reported to Army Group Centre that it no longer had the strength to maintain the offensive. The troops were physically and mentally exhausted . . . Fourth Army pulled back its divisions to their jumping-off points behind the Neva. The frontal attacks by both Fourth Army and Fourth Panzer Army were brought to a close . . . On the 5th December, the Red Army's counter-offensive opened.'

Although other writers than Ruehl had reported that the German Army changed from attack to defence and wrote that the Red Army had gone over to the offensive on 5 December, according to OKW the attacks which came in on that as well as on subsequent days were purely local. It was not until 10 December that the STAVKA of the Red Army issued a communiqué which read, in part, 'The Soviet armed forces have opened an offensive along the whole front from the White Sea to the Black Sea.' It was two weeks before Christmas.

## CHRISTMAS IN RUSSIA

The first Christmas of the war in Russia was described by a member of No 1 Company of the Para Engineer Battalion:

'We had been looking forward to a comfortable Christmas in the dug-outs we had built for ourselves, but then on 22nd December, came the order to move to a new location about 18 km away. The march was exhausting and for every five steps we moved forward we slid back two on the snowy and icy paths. It took hours to reach the new area and we were given a filthy room in a stone-built house. There were twenty-four of us in that lousy hole, all of us dreaming of the lovely dug-outs we had left behind and wondering who would be celebrating Christmas in them.'

'On the next day we started building new dug-outs to drive out the misery of not having a proper Christmas. We had no mail, but consoled ourselves that we would get a whole bundle in the New Year. We had made a tree and had decorated it with silver paper taken from cigarette packets and cheese wrappers. We had also got hold of some cotton wool from the first aid men. We had also been practising carols so that we would be prepared for the holy days. We were determined not to let anything depress us and to find humour where we could. There was one man, for example, who was very busily delousing himself while we were singing "Silent Night" . . . We knew of course, this coming Christmas would stand no comparison with the past ones but we would be happy with some proper food and perhaps a couple of packets of sweets, a few cigarettes, or a drop of Schnapps . . . The nicest thing would be a letter from home – but that was out of the question.

'On Christmas Eve we worked until midday, had lunch and were ordered to parade at 1500 hrs by which time we all had to have proper haircuts, were to be washed and shaved and have cleaned up our uniforms. It was a real carnival as 24 men tried to wash, shave, clean their teeth, polish their boots and brush their uniforms all in one little room. The barber came and gave us all a quick run over. At the appointed time we were all ready.

'We paraded in a deep gully as deep as a house and filled with snow. An open space had been shovelled out and in the centre of the area was an undecorated Christmas tree. I must say that I went on parade without any sort of feeling, but when the parade was dismissed after half an hour I had tears in my eyes – and I wasn't the only one. Captain Foelsche, a veteran of the Great War and a man who had spent several Christmasses in the front-line trenches, took the parade. We started to sing "Silent Night" and at the first notes I felt choked and tears came into my eyes. Our elderly, grey-haired commander made a little speech. Imagine it! In Russia, 15 degrees below zero, on parade in an open space surrounded by walls of snow, there were 150 German soldiers celebrating the event. Our thoughts flew homewards to our parents, children, wives and fiancés. Very unwillingly we came back to the brutal reality of where we were.

'When we got back into our room we lit the candles on our own tree. There was no mail so we had to make do with what the Company had organized. As I said before, we had not reckoned on getting much and were pleasantly surprised. We each received a Christmas cake, 250 grammes of biscuits, a kilo of peppermints, six tubes of sweets, 50 cigarettes and tobacco. We also had an issue of real bean coffee. We ate our Christmas cake with the coffee, then the biscuits and finally the peppermints. Then a good cigar and the atmosphere got quite pleasant. We sang carols and soldiers' songs and there was talk of the old days and even jokes. Suddenly Sergeant

Unversagt came in with two big parcels which had been packed and sent to us unknown soldiers by some young girls in Pomerania. If they could only have known the pleasure that we got from their kind action.

'I split the contents of the parcels into twenty-four separate groups. The main things in them were a harmonica, a pipe, 25 cigarettes, 10 cigars, note-paper, writing blocks, toothpaste, chocolate and other things. There was great excitement when we drew lots. Of course, everybody wanted the pipe. One of our comrades had arranged with his wife that at 2100 hrs he would go out into the night and look up at the Great Bear constellation. She would do the same. He left our room at 2100 hrs, all of us went with him and began to sing. After a time we all struck up with "The stars of our homeland", and faced westwards to where, more than 2,000 kms away our loved ones were sitting around their Christmas trees at home.'

It had been apparent to OKH as early as August, that the war in the east could not be won during 1941, and they made representations about the need for cold weather clothing. Their proposals were turned down and as a result the German Army, as we have seen from the narratives in this chapter, froze, fought and died in the winter battles of that first year in Russia. One of those who fought was Rudolf Lanz, a gunner in the flak artillery.

'The winter of 1941/42, was one of the coldest on record. It was hard and bitter and we were unprepared for it. The terrible snowstorms halted our march upon Moscow, but worse was to come. As a result of the Russian attacks we were forced to retreat. This was the first time in the war that this had happened.

'As a mark of distinction for what we had suffered on the Eastern Front during those bitter months, the Führer ordered that a commemorative medal be struck. This was in one grade only. There was no Second or First Class, just one medal for us all, Generals as well as ordinary soldiers. The medal fitted into the same button-hole as that for the Second Class Iron Cross and, like the EK II, displayed only the ribbon. That ribbon was predominantly red in colour with a narrow central stripe of white and black.

'Although the winter campaign medal was an award, nearly equal to the EK II in status, the ordinary soldiers in their usual cynical fashion, had soon given it other names. The two usual ones were "The Order of the Frozen Meat", or the "Mincemeat Medal". Those names reminded us of the agonies we had suffered from the terrible cold and that we had lost many comrades, not only as battle casualties but as the result of the shocking living conditions. There was nothing subversive in giving the medal those particular names – these were soldiers' descriptions.'

# Confident of Victory, 1942

## WINTER, THE NEW ENEMY

The Red Army's counter-offensive forced back the formations of Army Group Centre from the approaches to Moscow and the retreat of the German divisions began amid scenes of confusion. To bring order out of this chaos Hitler's directive of 18 December 1941 ordered that 'Major retrograde movements are not to be carried out. They lead to complete loss of heavy weapons and equipment . . . Troops are to be ordered to offer fanatical resistance to enemy units which have broken into their positions and are not to worry about the enemy who has broken through on the flanks or in the rear . . . The objective is to gain time . . .'

He admitted, in a speech on 30 January 1942, to commemorate the anniversary of the assumption of power in 1933, that 'It was not easy to change the direction of the war in the East from one in which we had always advanced to one in which we were on the defensive. It was not the Russians who had forced this change, rather it was the cold; 38, 40, 41 and sometimes 45 degrees below zero. Soldiers unaccustomed to such depths of cold cannot fight . . . As soon as the time came when we had to go over to the defensive, I saw it as my duty to take the responsibility for such an action upon my own shoulders . . . I want to tell my soldiers, here and now, wherever they may be listening to me in their frozen trenches – I know what you are going through, but I also know that the worst is behind us . . . Winter was the great hope of the eastern enemy . . . In four months we had reached almost to Moscow and Leningrad. Four winter months in the north have passed. The enemy advanced a few kilometres in a number of places and it cost him dear in blood and corpses. That may not concern him, but in a few weeks' time, in the south, the winter will break and spring will arrive . . . Then will come the time when the ice in the north will melt, when the ground will harden and when the German musketeer with his equipment can go into action again . . . I can tell you this, the German soldier at the Front knows he has not lost his infinite superiority over the Russian . . .'

That confidence was expressed by R. Stahlschmidt, of a field artillery regiment, who was certain that 1942 would be the year of victory. 'We knew that man for man we were better soldiers than the Russians. They had excellent weapons, vast amounts of material and overwhelming numbers of

men. But we who had survived the winter and the Red Army's massive attacks, were confident that we had their measure. It was in that optimistic spirit that we waited for the summer campaign to open.'

As early as February 1942, Army Group Centre had set up a defensive front sufficiently strong to hold the assaults of the Red Army, which was itself now tired from the strain of battle. The exhausted soldiers of both sides welcomed the bitter winter which brought a halt to major operations. Both sides now had to wait until the ground had hardened. Only then could new and far-ranging offensives be undertaken. Hitler, who in his speech claimed that Germany had 'the strongest army in the world and the strongest air force in the world', went on to claim that 1942, would be, 'once again a year of great victories'. He had already planned an offensive for the summer. It was code-named Operation 'Blue'.

### ALLIED DEFEAT AT DIEPPE

It was not only on the Eastern Front that the German Army was embattled. It was also fighting in Africa where it seemed, in the early summer of 1942, to be riding on the crest of a wave to victory. By the end of the year, however, it was in full retreat and heading for total defeat. In another theatre of operations, in France, the German forces did gain a positive victory, this one against a Canadian/British landing operation at Dieppe. Of this, Heinrich Kiss wrote:

'I was in an infantry unit in a division stationed near Dieppe. There was no warning that a British landing was expected although an increase in activity by enemy aircraft should have warned us. Late in the night of 19th August, I was relieved from guard duty and turned in to sleep. I remember it as being a bright, warm night and from the top of the cliffs in our area I can also recall that when I looked out to sea there was nothing suspicious to report. We were woken very early. An alarm call had come in from regimental HQ and we stood to arms. It would have been about 6 in the morning when a furious barrage opened. This came from the ships of the British navy and while their shells were falling all round us the RAF came in and bombed us.

'From our trenches on the top of the cliffs we saw emerging through a smoke-screen which the English had laid, lots of small craft racing through the sea towards us. Very quickly the British ships had grounded, the infantry had landed and were charging up the wide beach. Then our artillery opened up and shells began to land among the little boats. We opened fire upon the infantry with our machine-guns and mortars. Then more and more waves of boats came through the heavy defensive fire to land their men and there was talk of tanks coming down a sort of ramp on the ships. One of our battalion

officers was killed while attacking a tank with a flame-thrower and some of our men on top of the cliffs dropped hand-grenades on the heads of the Tommies sheltering at the base of the cliffs.

'The RAF had been flying about without any opposition, but, several hours later, our Luftwaffe fighters came into action attacking the landing ships and the larger vessels out at sea. This was something we only learned about later because at the time we could see nothing because of the smoke-screens which the British were still laying. I was wounded shortly after this and taken away to the RAP. According to my comrades not long after I was evacuated the first groups of British troops began to wave white flags and to surrender. The whole enterprise finished late in the afternoon. We had stopped the Tommies' invasion of Europe in 1942, or so we thought. They came back in 1944, and that time their invasion was successful.'

## OPERATION 'BLUE'

It is to the Eastern Front that we return, to that theatre of operations where the principal burden of the war was being carried and in which the next major offensive, Operation 'Blue' would open. For this the military formations of the army and the Luftwaffe belonging to Army Group South were to strike eastwards. The confidence to launch 'Blue' lay in the false conclusions which Hitler drew from the German Army's opening attacks in the late spring of 1942. To Halder's observation that the Red Army was withdrawing according to plan, Hitler retorted that the Russians were fleeing in disorder; that the army's blows had finally destroyed the enemy. Unshakably convinced that his appreciation was correct, the Führer drew up his plans. He divided Army Group South into two Army Groups, 'A' under Field Marshal List and 'B' commanded by Freiherr von Weichs. Army Group 'A' was to strike for the Caucasus and oil supplies of Georgia. Army Group 'B' was to drive eastwards to the Volga and capture the sprawling city of Stalingrad.

Hitler's confidence was not altogether shared by those in command. Many Generals realized that the vast salient which that eastern advance would create, so enormous a length of front, could not be held entirely by the formations of the German Army. These were now too few in number to permit this. Germany would be compelled to rely upon the forces of the less well armed and less experienced satellite nations, Roumania, Hungary and Italy. While Paulus's Sixth German Army, part of Weich's Army Group 'B', fought to take the city, the foreign units, positioned to the north and to the south of Stalingrad, would hold the shoulders of the attack.

In November the Red Army's carefully prepared, major counter-offensive opened. Its blows struck and dispersed the satellite hosts. Through



the gaps which had been created the Soviet forces poured and encircled German Sixth Army. The permission which Paulus sought from Hitler to withdraw the trapped forces, was refused. Instead Hitler planned that a fresh German battle group, Army Group 'Don', created from armoured units outside the pocket should break through. This new grouping was to smash a passage and reach Paulus's Sixth Army, but not to bring it out. Rather the task was to create a channel through which reinforcements would pour in such strength that they would eventually defeat the Red Army, keep a German grip on the Volga and, thereby, fulfil the principal objective of the summer campaign.

Despite heroic efforts the relief operation failed. Still the Führer refused to countenance Sixth Army's withdrawal. Instead, he ordered that Stalingrad was to be supplied by air. Goering had assured him that the Luftwaffe could do this. Goering was lying. Such an operation was beyond the capabilities of the German air force. There soon came time when Sixth Army was starving in the ruins of the dead city. At one point in the siege one of Paulus's staff officers was flown out of the pocket so that he could tell Hitler the true and terrible situation in which the troops were placed. The Führer refused to accept the facts which were presented to him; that the dead were unburied, that wounded lay untended in the roofless ruins of factories, in cellars and in sewers. That the army was freezing, starving and suffering in misery. That Generals whose divisions had been destroyed had taken up rifles or machine-pistols and had fought as ordinary soldiers until they too fell in unequal battle – as their soldiers had.

## LETTERS FROM STALINGRAD

By the middle of January 1943, the Soviets had compressed Sixth Army's pocket and had split it in two. Both German enclaves fought on but the end was never in doubt. Shortly before it came the soldiers were told that each could write home. These letters were then flown out of the pocket. In the Reich the mail was read in order that the Nazi leaders could establish the mood of the army which they had condemned to death. Most letters were subsequently delivered but some were not and several sacks of undelivered mail were found by the Allies at the end of the war. Those letters make poignant reading and extracts from a few are reproduced here by permission of the German War Graves Commission. They express every sort of emotion: rejection of God, professional acceptance of the situation and loving, tender farewells.

'In Stalingrad one rejects any idea of a God. I must say this, dear father, and it saddens me for two reasons. You raised me because there was no mother and you kept always before my eyes the picture of God and of an

immortal soul. I regret my words for a second reason, because these will be the last which you will receive from me and I shall never be able to tell you why in explanation . . . I looked for God in every crater, in each ruined house, on every corner, with each comrade; when I lay alone in my slit trench . . . God did not show himself although I cried out to him with all my heart . . . No, father, there is no God. I write this and know how terrible it is that I cannot make a reconciliation. And if there is a God then he is in your hymn books and prayers: in the pious words of priests and pastors, with people who have the sound of bells and the perfume of incense. He is not here in Stalingrad.'

'Dear Father! The division has been selected for the big battle but this will not take place. You may wonder why it is to you that I write and also to your official address. But what I have to say in this my last letter can only be said between men. You will find ways to tell Mother what has happened. Today we are being allowed to write. That means, for anybody who has an idea of the real situation, that this is the last time.

'You are a Colonel on the General Staff, Father, and you know what is happening. Thus I do not need to write things which might sound sentimental. This is the end. I think it may last another eight days and then it will be the finish. I do not seek explanations for our present situation here. These are now unimportant and serve no purpose. But if there is anything I want to say it is this: do not seek the explanations for our present situation from us, but from those around you and from those who are responsible. Keep your chin up, Father, you and those who share your opinions. Be careful to ensure that nothing worse happens to our Fatherland. Let the hell here on the Volga be a warning to you. I beg you, do not throw away this knowledge.

'And now to present things. Of the whole division only 69 men are still fit for duty. Bleyer is still alive and so is Hartlieb. Little Degen has lost both arms and will almost certainly be back in Germany now. It is the end for him, too. Ask him for any details which you may need to know. D . . . has lost all hope. I should love to know what he thinks of our situation and its consequences. We have two machine-guns and 400 rounds of ammunition, one mortar and ten rounds. Other than that only tiredness. Berg . . . broke out with 20 men, in defiance of orders. Perhaps it is better to know in three days what will happen than to wait three weeks.

'Finally, to the personal. You may be certain that we shall make a good end although at 30 it is a bit premature. No sentimentality. Give Lydia and Helen each a handshake from me and greetings to one and all. With my hand at the rim of my helmet in salute, Father, your son, Lieutenant . . . takes leave of you.'

'I have been looking for some time at your photograph. In my mind is the memory of that lovely summer evening of the last year of peace as we

walked through a valley of blossom towards our house. Life was such a rich carpet spread before us . . . Now there is no valley of blossom; you are not with me and in place of the carpet of colour there is an unending field of white in which there is no summer but only winter. And there is no future any more . . . at least not for me . . . If you receive this letter, read it well and you may hear my voice . . . They told us that we are fighting for Germany but they are very few here who believe that our pointless sacrifice can serve any purpose at all to our Fatherland.'

## CAPTIVITY AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

When the battle of Stalingrad ended on 2 February 1943, the Russians claimed to have taken more than 190,000 German soldiers prisoner. That figure was reduced within weeks to the more realistic figure of 100,000, but was lowered still further several times during the war to an absurd total of 35,000. Of all the German soldiers who were taken captive at Stalingrad less than 5,000 came back home. Those whom summary execution and untreated wounds did not take away immediately, died within weeks from the bitter cold. For this was the depth of winter with temperatures often 25 degrees below zero and the first overnight halts on the march into captivity were made on the open steppe. In the following months others died of typhus and dysentery. Those who survived were put to work in the mines of Siberia and died from the sicknesses associated with mining for lead, copper and other dangerous minerals. So it is not surprising that I have met only one man who survived the horrors of Stalingrad. Johann Radl served as a gunner in an infantry division. He set out to return to his native Austria even before the war ended. He was released from a camp east of the Volga in the first weeks of 1945.

'The situation [in Stalingrad] when the order came to surrender [February 1943] can only be described as inhuman. Towards the end the Red Army infantry seldom bothered to attack our positions. We – Sixth Army – were more or less already dead men and there was no sense in the Russians losing good soldiers in unnecessary assaults. They could afford to wait until the end came and to bring about that end used only shelling and bombings.

'I do not need to describe the misery of the first days as a prisoner. Let me just say that there were thousands of us and that the Soviet Army had more important considerations than feeding and sheltering this mass of enemy soldiers. This does not forgive, but does explain why so many died in the first weeks. We were too big a problem for the local authorities. Eventually the unwieldy column was broken up into manageable groups and mine was quartered in a Kholkoz somewhere to the north of Stalingrad – not

too far from the Volga. We were each interrogated and when I told them that my father had been in the illegal Communist Party of Austria, they did some checking up. About a week after my interrogation I was called to go to the camp commandant's office and was interrogated by a civilian who spoke Austrian/German. He mentioned several things connected with past events in Austria and then asked why I had not told my first interrogators that my father had been given an 18-month sentence in a concentration camp. The Soviets were so well informed about conditions in Austria that they knew my father had been sentenced for listening to a foreign radio station.

'My work norm was reduced because my principal duty was to re-educate my fellow prisoners in right thinking – as a political activist. At the end of January 1945, after nearly two years as a prisoner, I was called up to the Kommandantura and given my discharge papers together with a pass which authorized me to be fed by Red Army units. A special pass was needed to travel by train, and I was not issued with one of these so I walked most of the way home. I found the going easier once I had crossed out of the Soviet Union and was in Roumania and then Hungary. I always made for the Communist Party HQ in a town and flourished my free meal pass. It never failed and even if the food was not lavish it was marvellous to eat proper food again after prison diet. The most difficult part of my journey was in the Russian-occupied Zone of Austria. The Party Officials all had a Red Army officer in their offices most of whom were not very pleased to be helping a former enemy, despite my family's pro-Russian attitudes. I reached home during August 1945.'

Radl was lucky that his servitude finished quickly and did not end in death. Another man who came back from Stalingrad was the unknown author of a report published in the German War Graves Commission book, *Kriegsgraeber in Europa*.

'After our last bits and pieces had been plundered, haversacks and blankets stolen, medals and badges ripped from our coats with curses and imprecations, the thousands of those who had been assembled were driven out on the march by an enemy who knew no mercy . . . Towards evening we reached the ruins of a place named Yersevko and stayed overnight there encamped on the snow. In the morning we headed for Dubovka. We left behind in Yersevko thousands of our comrades; German soldiers who had died on a steppe where there was neither food nor shelter.

'Our second march day took the column of misery and dying to Dubovka on the Volga. En route we were attacked and robbed by civilians who stole anything we still had with us. Boots were taken from the soldiers' feet so that they had to march bare-footed through the snow. Thousands died that day. They sank, helpless, to the ground right and left of the road and died in the snow which soon covered them. During the evening of 4th February 1943, we reached Dubovka. There was no POW camp there, only

a simple, guarded, Collecting Point. There were no shelters, cookhouses, sanitary arrangements or anything else. Outside the town there were the ruins of a monastery, a large sheep pen and, in another place, a former Red Army troop camp consisting of earthen huts. There was no heating material. The only drinking water was a frozen puddle near a blown-up water pump. The Red Army left us to our own devices. Some supplies of raw salt fish and dry bread were issued. In the camp there was spotted typhus. Soon everybody was infected. In the camp there was starvation, cholera, dysentery, paratyphus and hunger delusions. Soon there were more dead than living. We never saw any Russian personnel. After twelve days we survivors were driven away from the heaps of dead to the gates of the monastery; first of all the rank and file and then, a day later, the officers. Two columns left this place of the dead. We left behind 17,000 dead comrades. The survivors, perhaps two to three thousand in number, marched southwards for two days, driven through the ruins of the city of Stalingrad. Whoever was too weak to go any farther was shot by the guards at the rear of the column, supervised by Soviet officers.

‘After 120 kilometres we reached Beketovka. A large living area had been cleared of civilians and surrounded by barbed wire. This was to be our prison camp. Those just arriving had a shock. The two-storey houses and the open places – in short the whole area surrounded by barbed wire – was packed with the dead bodies of those who had been taken captive in the Stalingrad South pocket and who had died here of disease. The number of dead was thought to be about 42,000 . . .’

## AIR SUPPLY

It is usual when considering the battle of Stalingrad to think particularly of the ground fighting and the loss of the soldiers of Sixth Army. The role of the Luftwaffe is seldom considered and when it is, the view is often a critical one; of a Service which failed its army comrades. It is an unjust accusation for the Luftwaffe lost nearly 500 transport planes in its attempt to carry supplies by air to the encircled troops.

Goering's boast that his air force could fly-in sufficient supplies caused Hitler to order Sixth Army to hold its position on the Volga. Responsible Luftwaffe officers in charge of operational units knew that Goering's claim was not possible. Lieutenant General Fiebig, commanding 8 Flieger Korps, was astonished when he discussed the situation with Schmidt, Paulus's chief of staff, to be told that the army would have to be supplied by air. To this demand Fiebig retorted, ‘It is absolutely impossible. Our transport aircraft are needed in Africa and on other Fronts. I must warn against any exag-

gerated hopes,' and in a later conversation emphasized, 'I must warn against placing too much confidence upon being supplied by air . . . I have thought deeply about this and come back to the conclusion that Sixth Army cannot be supplied in this fashion. It is just not possible to calculate the effects of the Russian winter or enemy action upon the conduct of the operation.'

Fiebig was correct in his assessment of the situation. The minimum daily requirement of Sixth Army was 480 tons of fuel, ammunition and food. The maximum load which a Ju 52 could carry was 2 tons. Therefore each day the air bridge would need no fewer than 240 machines to make the round trip. Even under normal conditions the effects of enemy action, crashes upon take-off or landing and mechanical failures of all sorts would reduce the number of operational aircraft. It had also to be considered that, as a general rule, only one in three aircraft would be operational at any one time. Accepting that equation as correct, then a minimum of 720 Ju 52s was needed, and the Luftwaffe had only 750, some of which were in Africa or serving in other theatres of operation. It was, of course, possible to use other aircraft types, but these had shorter ranges and lower pay loads. Thus more of those types would have to be taken away from other important, operational duties – and, of course, there was the ever-present precarious fuel situation. The question of air supply to Stalingrad was an insoluble problem.

But Goering had assured Hitler that it could be done and General Schmidt, who had come to Sixth Army direct from Hitler's headquarters, was also convinced that it was possible. It was not – and unit war diaries record the attempts made by Luftwaffe crews to supply their comrades on the ground. The following report has been supplied by Franz Kurowski, author of the book, *Luftbrücke Stalingrad*, and shows the conditions under which crews of the Luftwaffe's transport aircraft carried out their missions.

'An icy wind, the biting cold of Russia, thrusts chilling fingers into our faces. Crammed into flying-suits we lean so that our backs rest against the warm sides of the starting-up lorry. For more than half an hour now hot air has been thawing out the engines of our aeroplane. Along the runway Ju 52s stand in a long line. We shall be off soon on a night operation, a supply drop to our army comrades who have been encircled for months past.

'There are gashes and holes in our aircraft's wings and tail; the scars of yesterday's mission. Today we shall be the first machine to take-off. It is already late in a bright, clear, winter afternoon. The engines roar as they are revved to full power. Ready for take-off. The machine lumbers through frozen snow up to the starting-point where a figure, muffled to the eyes, raises the white flag with green diagonal stripes. There is a cloud of powdered snow as our aeroplane roars down the strip, takes off, circles the airfield and then sets course for Stalingrad. As we get near to the city we remove the aircraft door and icy air howls through the machine. It gets dark very quickly. Below and in front of us we can see a great many points of light;

down below there are houses and whole villages lit up. We are over enemy territory and the first flak salvoes come up but burst harmlessly behind us. Half an hour later and the altimeter indicates we have descended to 4,000 metres. The numbing cold penetrates our flying-suits. I sit on a parachute attached to a box of ammunition which has been pushed near to the door.

‘Searchlights sweep the sky and then on our starboard side and behind us there are AA bursts. The fire from the enemy flak stops abruptly and one lot of searchlights goes out only to be replaced by others whose beams criss-cross the sky. We are nearing the target area. Searchlight beams catch us and for as long as we are held there we are blinded by the intense light. Once out of them and below we can see long columns of vehicles driving with headlights blazing. These are Russian supply columns. Their blazing headlights are evidence that we do not have air superiority. Our pilot throttles back and we begin to descend in a series of tight curves. The altimeter shows that we are now just a few hundred metres above the ground and it is time for the run in to the ‘pocket’. We expect that any second now the enemy will open fire, but there is no firing. What has happened? Not one single shell; no tracer? The pilot presses the horn; we are over the target. As we throw out the first box we are caught in the blinding light of a cone of searchlights, but apart from that there is no other reaction from the enemy. Has the ground fighting ended?’

‘We are flying at a height of 150 metres. The heavy ammunition boxes are dragged across the floor of the aircraft to the door and are then flung out. The observer sees, with a sense of shock, a black shadow racing towards us. There is a sudden deafening crash. An enemy plane has rammed us. Our machine rears up, seems to stand still and then the nose dips and we drop like a lift. I had been flung against the opposite wall by the force of the collision, but with a single leap reach the aircraft door again. I think of baling out but my parachute is in the tail of the aircraft. I grip the door handles tightly. The earth rushes up to meet us. There is a bright flickering light behind us; an enemy aircraft is on our tail firing at us and then comes another heavy thud. He has rammed us again.’

‘Slowly the pilot gains control of the machine. Then there is another crash. We have struck the ground and our Ju rolls, with flaps raised and only on one wheel between bomb and shell craters. Frightening thoughts race through my mind. Shall we be left here in the “pocket”? To get maximum power the pilot overrides the “governor” and opens the throttle as far as he can. The roar of the engines rises to a scream. The tailwheel still drags along the ground, but the Ju 52, shuddering under the strain, begins at last to climb. Two minutes later the AA guns fire at us and although we are hit again in the tail and wing we gain a little height and then begin to climb quickly. The right wing has a wide gash, a metre deep. The flap end is torn off, one-third of the elevator is missing. Another piece, almost a metre long

stands vertically in the air. Thank Heaven, it tears off in the slipstream and the steering difficulties it has caused go with it. We have more than 300 kilometres to cover to reach our aerodrome and the most important question is, will the plane hold out? It did and we landed safely but shakily on our own airfield.'

## TANK-TO-TANK COMBAT

As we have seen Army Group Don was given the task of creating a passage through to Sixth Army and one of the formations which bore the burden of the assault was 6th Panzer Division. Its task was to force a crossing of the River Aksai and then to advance north-eastwards along the railway line to reach Stalingrad. R. Pohl remembers.

'D-Day for the operation was 12th December, and by the third day our advance was slowing down. Ivan put in everything he had to halt us, using massed formations of tanks. On the 15th I was wounded near a miserable hell-hole called Verky Kumsky. Very early in the morning of that day great numbers of T-34s had attacked us and had split our regiments forcing them for a time to fight individual battles. Then, later in the morning, hundreds of Ivan's tanks came into sight. By this time we were outnumbered probably by 3 or 4 to 1. Those reinforcement tanks were backed by whole regiments of anti-tank guns. We had been ordered to make an attack to capture towards Verky Kumsky and as soon as we moved into the opening stages of our assault the Russian mass which had been thundering towards us suddenly halted. This was a good tactical move on their part because in those days it was not usual to fire the main armament of a tank while on the move. To do so forfeited accuracy. To achieve accuracy one needed a stable platform i.e., a stationary tank. That is why the Russian tanks had halted. Even now, fifty years after the event, I remember that day well and particularly the sight of that fleet of tanks whose wide front overlapped ours and which was echeloned in great depth. It was a huge block of tanks – line after line of white-painted machines whose vehicle numbers, painted in black, stood out against the white-painted turrets.

'Our panzer companies rolled forward tactically disposed and as commandant of our Pz IV, I had a good view of what we were facing. It seemed that every gun in that mass of Ivans was pointing at my vehicle. I suppose that the Red gun tactic was to concentrate the fire of a group of tank and anti-tank guns upon a single panzer and thus to knock us out one by one. We had one advantage; mobility. They were like a herd of buffalo which does not have the freedom of movement enjoyed by the leopards which prowl round the flanks of the herd – and we were the leopards. We manoeuvred and picked them off because they were immobile whereas we were moving



and therefore harder to hit. Being stationary had its disadvantages as well as its advantages. Practically every shot we fired was a good hit. Of course, we lost machines but our vehicle repair workshops were up with us and changed damaged parts under fire. Some of the knocked out panzers which could not be repaired were cannibalized to get parts, fuel and ammunition.

‘Two of our Companies were in Verky Kumsky but they were surrounded and in danger of being overrun. To rescue them our Colonel grouped the last reserves, five companies of tanks, and ordered a head-on charge at the Russian mass in front of us. This was a desperate move because some of our panzers had fired off all their main ammunition and had no time to load up again. The unexpected bold move succeeded. The panzers that had no shells fired their machine-guns to keep the enemy anti-tank guns and infantry down while those panzers that still had shells shot their way through the weakest part of the Russian mass. We charged into the village and engaged the twenty or so T-34s which were milling about inside it, rescued our trapped comrades and took them back to the main body. Then we tanked up, loaded fresh ammunition and went back to the battle. During the early afternoon my panzer was hit three times in quick succession by anti-tank shells. There was a battery of guns, so well concealed that I never saw them until it was too late. Two of their shots hit and passed through our body but did no great damage. The third penetrated our right-hand side but did not exit and continued to whirl around inside the vehicle. We were lucky to escape with only two casualties; the driver killed and me wounded. The other crew members were unhurt. Shell fragments wounded me very badly in the calves and feet. The radio was undamaged and we called up a couple of vehicles from our Company. One of them fired air bursts over the Reds to keep them down while the other moved to a flank and ran over the guns and crews. That gave us a breathing space until the recovery panzer came up and towed us to where the workshops carried out emergency repairs and ordered up a new crew to replace mine.

‘I was taken to a base hospital and when the Red Army’s winter offensive threatened the whole of Army Group South was taken into Poland. I convalesced in Germany before being returned to unit in March 1943, just in time for the preparation for the Battle of Kursk.’

# The Turning-Point, 1943

## REST AND RECREATION

Heid Ruehl, serving at that time with the artillery regiment, recalled the late spring and early summer of 1943, when 'Das Reich' Division, part of Army Group South, was in reserve.

'The heavy fighting in which the SS Panzer Corps had been involved around Kharkov, during the spring of 1943, had finally come to an end. One recalls those months as being the end of a hard-fought, but exciting campaign; one of continual movement, of marches which lasted for weeks on end and of having to make frequent changes of position.

'Today, decades later, one can lose oneself remembering how we stood up on the gun carriages as we raced after the Russians who were trying to escape on their panje-sledges. And smile as we recall how we loaded our trucks with sacks of flour and sugar, with barrels of melting butter, tins of every sort of food – all things which had been looted from German stores during the Russians' westward advance. Now they [the enemy] were going in the other direction and were trying to escape by throwing out the ballast of looted food and thus lightening their sledges. They threw everything away except weapons and these we only found with the dead when the battle was over.

'We did not want for food in those days, nor for some time afterwards. But for weeks we were not able to take our uniforms from off our bodies and we seldom slept under cover. But that did not matter very much. Our winter clothing was excellent, quite different from that of the previous year and, in any case, the cold was not so intense. We could survive it!

'We well deserved the rest that was given us after capturing Kharkov. First we occupied the barracks at Ossnova airfield and then went on to quarters in the village of Polevoya. There was a minimum of parades and we were bivouacked in a romantic region of hazelnut bushes. To begin with we were captivated by the song of the nightingales but after a few days we wished that they would go somewhere else and sing.

'In my ears I can still hear the marvellous singing of the Ukrainians who had volunteered to serve with us. There was a whole platoon of them, intelligent men who were ready to fight against the Soviets. We trained them so well on our weapons that they could have served as gun numbers in our

battery. Yet one morning they had all vanished and had all taken their rifles with them. Only one man did not desert and he told us why the others had gone. One of the officers had hit a Ukrainian with a riding whip because he had not saluted properly. It is very probable that most of us would have reacted in the same way to such arrogance.

'I can still see the battalion administration officer standing on the huge scales in the Kolkhoz, the collective farm which housed our Orderly Room, cookhouse and living-quarters. The Admin Officer threatened the entire battery with heaven and hell and the most terrible punishments because one of our men had, supposedly, been seen "requisitioning" a beast. Unfortunately the miscreant had not been caught in the act, but he [the QM] knew very well that the animal in question was hidden somewhere in the Company area . . . He looked round the ring of puzzled faces. When he asked the CO, the platoon and the gun commanders they all agreed that something should be done. Meanwhile a couple of the men in the crowd had to slip away to hide the laughter which would have told the Admin Officer that his suspicions had been correct. He could not know that the spot on which he was making his flaming speech of accusation against the thieves was directly above the place where the cut up beef was buried. As soon as he had gone it was dug up. A couple of days later he was the guest of our battery commander and enjoyed a marvellous goulash with the customary noodles which he ate without making one single reference to stolen cattle.

'At about this time our CO, whom we named "Fieseler Storch" from his peculiar way of walking, took up the suggestion which some of the men had made, to hold an open air summer feast. Not too far away from our billeting area were a number of ladies belonging to the Signals branch. It was not difficult to get them to come to our feast but among the preparations that needed to be made was that of constructing a dance floor. This task was given to me as a sort of 'occupation therapy'. I was helped in my task by the Russian mayor, the Starost, to whom I went for advice and help. He started off with a string of excuses; "No wood, no saw mill, so no boards." Very logical. But he was up against a very stubborn German NCO and once he had agreed I was astonished at the way in which the Russians improvised . . . Within two days a tree-felling commando had brought in some tree trunks and the Russians began to erect a platform in the village square and to cover this with well-cut planks – all done within a couple of hours. We were all very impressed with this performance and filled with admiration at the capability of the Russians. As a reward – money was not asked for – we promised the Starost that he could use the wood for his own people after our unit had moved out. That promise may well have been the impetus for the speed with which they worked. In an open space in our bivouac area we had soon created a sort of Bavarian festival site and the dance floor was almost ready . . .

'Rumours grew that we were to be re-equipped. Our battalion was to be made more mobile, as befitted a panzer unit, by being issued with SP guns, the "Wespe", a 10.5cm howitzer and the "Hummel" a 15cm howitzer. As soon as we had been issued with these new weapons our rest period ended and we began to train hard for the forthcoming summer offensive.'

## HOLDING THE LINE AT VOLKHOV

In the northern sector of the Eastern Front fighting was still going on around Leningrad. One of the units engaged was 100th Gebirgs Regiment whose commanding officer, Helmut Herrman, wrote an account of the defensive fighting in the Volkhov area during the summer of 1943. From 1941, Army Group North's attempts to cut off the city of Leningrad had been countered by the Red Army's efforts to raise the siege. The River Volkhov, some 60 kilometres to the south-east of Leningrad, had been since the earliest days of the war the scene of furious, long-drawn-out battles which had gained for it a reputation as terrible as that of Verdun in the Great War, or the more recent Stalingrad.

'At the end of June 1943, I was commanding the battalion during the temporary absence of our CO, Major Wecker. For some weeks past we had been involved in changing our positions, which meant in the vast majority of cases, leaving well-constructed fortifications to take over less strongly built places.

'The front line on such sectors was often that at which a Russian penetration had been sealed off or where a German attack had been brought to a standstill. We finally took over a section of the line upon which, only a few weeks later, the full force of the enemy's long-expected offensive was to fall. The area was marshy and dotted with pieces of sandy ground none of which was more than 5 metres high in our sector. On the enemy side the ground climbed slightly. There was dense forest and a few clumps of birch trees. Movement in the marshy areas was only possible along corduroy roads, but there was firm going on the sandy areas.

'The battalion's positions were set up so that we had an area of high ground on each flank. No 1 Company was on the right wing, No 2 on the left and No 3 Company was in reserve. Our right-flank neighbour was the regiment's 3rd Battalion and on the left we had a battalion of the 85th Gebirgs Regiment. From certain places between the battalions as well as between the individual companies the enemy had observation into our lines.

'On my first tour of inspection through the positions into which we had just moved – a place we were to call "Rawhide Height", a squadron of low-flying, slow-flying Russian Il 2s came over. These machines were so well armoured that rifle and machine-gun fire had little effect upon them. It was

clear that on this occasion their targets were much farther back so that for the moment I was not too afraid. But the thought stayed with me that if they had bombed our positions they would have destroyed our trenches and dug-outs. It was further clear to me that such air raids would be a feature of the opening phase of the Russian offensive. The question worried me; How could we protect ourselves against this threat?

I knew that during the First World War dug-outs had been constructed using tree trunks driven into the earth. This is what we would have to do. I turned to Regiment and was able to convince them. Regiment went to Division and work was begun on cutting down trees and sawing these in lengths which were brought by night into our positions. Where the ground allowed it we began the construction of deep bunkers which would be proof against heavy artillery fire.

'The positions held by No 2 Company were the ones in the greatest danger. On the enemy side the ground rose slightly and the Russians had also run out saps and trenches dangerously close to our positions. The only track to the Company was across the swampy sector completely under enemy observation. At that time of the year the nights did not get completely dark so that movement could be seen even during what were normally the hours of darkness. In addition, the Russians sent out battle patrols each night looking for weak spots in our defence. These were always beaten off by using one of the guns of our infantry gun platoon which fired from a flank into the ground immediately in front of No 2 Company's positions . . . It was used in the following fashion: once No 2 Company had established that an enemy attack was under way a flare was fired over the threatened area. Immediately the gun fired. The secret was that the gun was manned day and night and the gun number sat waiting for the warning flare. Before it had died away the first shells were falling.

'It was immediately clear to me that No 2 Company would be a forlorn hope when the Russian attack came in. It struck me as absurd that a natural obstacle, like the marsh, should be behind us and not in front of us. A thorough reconnaissance produced the solution to the problem. If the left sector of the battalion could be withdrawn to the firm ground behind the swamp, work could begin on building good positions and the track leading up to the Company positions would be out of sight of the enemy. My decision was quickly reached. No 3 Company, which was occupying the area into which No 2 Company would move, was ordered to begin work on a system of defence in depth, in what would be the new front line.

'Meanwhile, No 2 Company was suffering from Russian battle patrols as well as from artillery and mortar barrages. As the movement which I proposed meant pulling back the front line for a distance of only 400 metres, I expected that Regiment would authorize this automatically. Major Wecker, our former CO, and now acting as regimental commander, came forward to

see the problem for himself. I showed him the exposed positions of No 2 Company. He agreed to my plan but told me that he would have to get agreement from Division because any withdrawal would affect the neighbouring units. Colonel Glasl, who was acting as divisional commander, came into our battalion area to judge the situation. When I showed him No 2 Company's positions he was shaken . . . He promised that he would immediately contact Corps because a withdrawal of the battle line was not a decision that he could make. There was a Führer Order which forbade the slightest withdrawal of the front line without Hitler's permission. Corps reacted and sent the chief of staff, a colonel. I dragged him through the swamp and across the area over which the Russians had observation. The colonel, who was to be killed in action during the offensive, understood the situation but regretted, because of the Führer Order, etc., that he would have to obtain permission from Army. In the meantime losses to the 2nd Company continued to rise and so did my blood pressure.

'Army could make no decision but sent a lieutenant-colonel from the Staff who was to make a report. I put him through the same routine as the other officers had suffered and explained the measures which I intended to take. He declared himself completely satisfied and promised me that his report would be favourably written. He himself could not make a decision . . . To cut the thing short, Army asked Army Group and received the necessary authority but with the remark that according to the Führer Order, etc., a withdrawal was not permitted, but in view of the need for the action . . .

'Army Group's agreement was passed down through the channels. This unnecessary toing and froing had cost three weeks, three weeks of daily losses, mostly to No 2 Company. It was unbelievable but a fact that the Eastern Front was seen as "The OKH Theatre of Operations" and Hitler had taken over as Supreme Commander of OKH. Italy, on the other hand was considered as a "Wehrmacht Theatre of Operations" and came under OKW. This allowed the commanders on the ground more freedom.

'During those three weeks the battalion did not remain inactive. No 3 Company helped by No 4 Company built dug-outs and positions which would form the future front line and sited those positions to give mutual support. The positions were built in such a fashion that they could not be attacked frontally. The Pioneer Platoon laid a row of T mines along a 300-metre length of swamp, each mine placed a metre apart and detonated the whole 300 in one huge blast. This created a small earthquake, a wall of mud rose into the earth and when it had settled a swampy, impassable water-filled ditch some 100 metres wide protected the front line. Barbed wire strengthened the defences. We learned later from a Russian deserter that the explosion of our mines had been taken by the enemy to be the detonation of a salvo from the "Stalin organ". No 1 Company was also employed in

building bunkers, a very important task as the withdrawal from the old front line made their area that much more sensitive.

'The withdrawal was made just in time and the enemy did not discover it immediately. The Russian offensive opened with hours of drum fire upon our positions. A deserter had told us the date and time of the offensive. It was 22nd July 1943. The Company Commander of No 1 Company had been out looking for his supply column and was just able to return to his positions when the barrage opened. What we had expected happened. The area which No 2 Company had held before being moved back was smothered with shells of medium and heavy calibre. The ground was ploughed up. No one could have survived such a bombardment. Then the Red Army infantry came in in battalion strength, convinced that the shellfire had destroyed everything. They carried on their assault intending to widen the breach which they thought had been created. They advanced straight into our enfilade fire and into the obstructions in the marsh.

'For more than two weeks three Soviet regiments attacked the positions which 1st Battalion held, with the main effort coming in against No 1 Company. The attacks followed heavy barrages and were made usually at dawn. Some of the assaulting troops were caught in their own artillery fire so furious were their assaults. Our men could only survive the shellfire by staying in the deep dug-outs and this meant that the Russians always got into our trenches and had to be driven out by immediate counter-attack. We, the defenders, had the advantage of knowing the layout of our defensive system. During the second week the Red Air Force attacked the whole battlefield as far back as the artillery positions with carpets of bombs. Their raids were made at night and it was then that we experienced, for the first time, the "Christmas Trees", the flares which were the target markers. Each night the Company portering-parties, together with the men of the pioneer platoon, brought up bombs and grenades, repaired damaged trenches and brought back the wounded and the dead. The mortar platoon often had to dig their mortars out of the swampy ground and the signallers went out during the pauses in the barrages to repair broken lines and to repair communications. The stretcher-bearers were always in action.

'During the course of the offensive No 2 Company was badly hit. The Company Commander, Lieutenant Schneider, was killed by shrapnel as he came out of his Tac HQ to get an idea of the situation. The enemy's barrage on that first day destroyed the forest and left only tree stumps standing. By the third day even they had been torn away. The whole landscape was a massive field of craters. One had a longer field of vision, but nothing was recognizable any more. When the battalion, reduced to a handful of men, was finally pulled out we could proudly say that the front line was still intact. For this action the battalion received fifty Iron Crosses (First Class) which I distributed immediately.'

## FIRESTORM IN HAMBURG

Whereas at the beginning of 1942, Germany had stood in the position of undisputed power in Europe, the end of that year saw her facing military reverses in two theatres of war, Russia and Africa. Then, in 1943, the first hammer blows of the concerted Allied air offensive struck her cities, reinforcing the unco-ordinated attacks that the RAF and the USAF had been making for years. The first major, terrifying demonstration of Allied air power was made against Hamburg between 24 July and 3 August. The climax of that series of raids was reached during the night of 27/28 July, when the release of hundreds of thousands of incendiary bombs produced a sea of flames – a fire-storm. This raid had been an experiment to see whether such a storm could be created. Its success at Hamburg was followed by attacks upon other German cities and did not end until Dresden was destroyed in February 1945.

The Department of Printed Books of the Imperial War Museum has in its archives the official report by the Police Chief of Hamburg on the result of that series of raids. Its pages describe how a fire-storm was created. 'It is easy to explain its physical development. The simultaneous explosion of a great number of incendiary bombs creates a large number of fires which eventually build up to create one huge conflagration. The hot air rising from that blaze produces a suction effect producing winds greater in power than conventional wind forces . . . There are vast differences in temperature . . . Whereas . . . temperatures of 20 to 30 degrees Celsius can be measured, in fire-storms the differences lie between, 600, 800 and even 1000 degrees . . . The terrifying power of fire-storms cannot be measured by normal meteorological standards . . .'

The violence of such fire-storms were beyond the capabilities of the fire brigades to control let alone extinguish. There were reports that some fire crews were sucked into the holocaust and other stories that furniture and even motor cars were seen flying through the air towards the flames. There was also a story that some survivors had been splashed with napalm. To extinguish the flames they had submerged themselves in the rivers and canals of the city only to begin burning again as soon as they emerged from the water. A development of that story was that after a time the SS went round and shot them, to put them out of their misery. It is a story that was refuted by Martin Middlebrook who found no evidence to support it. But the raids themselves had been terrifying in the scale of destruction and in the way in which the victims had died. Hans Schumann wrote:

'My brother lived in Hamburg and when news of the raids was released was granted home leave. He was stationed at that time on the Channel coast working as a storeman in a naval depot. The change in him when he came to our parent's home was terrible. For days he would say nothing, but then



it all came out in a burst of words. His wife and children, together with their neighbours, had all taken shelter in the air raid cellar of their house. He and another man opened the iron door which formed the entrance to the shelter. It was still warm and yet this was five days after the last raid had ended. As the door opened there was a sickening smell of burned and decaying flesh. By the light of their torches the men looked inside at the bodies. All those in the cellar were sitting like statues – statues made of leather. Inside the door was a pile of ashes and bones. Those nearest the door had been crumbled into dust by the heat of the fire. My brother kept saying that he hoped those in the cellar had been overcome by smoke and died in that fashion. He could not bear to think that they had been roasted alive. I think that what he had seen must have in some way mentally unbalanced him because he left his safe job in a store and volunteered for every suicide mission that the Navy launched and was drowned on a training exercise with a Linse explosive motor-boat.’

## WOMEN AT WAR: THE FLAKHELPERINNEN

With the deterioration in her military position which had become evident in 1943, it might have been expected that German women would have been called up for national service, as they had been in Britain and in the USSR. This was not the case and voluntary enlistment was the normal method of entry for the German woman eager to serve her country. Traute Kren’s experience was not a normal one. In the coffee house of the airport departure lounge in Vienna, Traute, one of my dearest friends, suddenly started to talk of her experiences in the war. I had known her for more than forty years and in all that time she had said nothing of her service. Aware that I was working on this book she began to describe her experiences, beginning with service in the BDM (the League of German Maidens) and then in the RAD, finishing up with her work as a Flakhelferin in the anti-aircraft defence system.

‘Although the main part of my service began late in 1944, I had been serving for two years before that. My first duties were carried out with the League of German Maidens and I worked for a local family. During my eight-month-long term of service I mucked out the cattle stables, cleaned out the pigs and did housework. I thought that that completed my service but only a few months later I was called up again and this time for service with the Reichsarbeitsdienst. My group was taken to Czestochau in Poland and, again, I went to work on one of the farms in the area. The Poles who had formerly owned them had been dispossessed and replaced by Volksdeutsch farmers. We worked for them. There were also Polish families working on the farms as hired labour and their living conditions were appalling. Many

of them had to make their homes in haystacks and they were very badly fed. They hated us and showed it. For young girls like us those bitter men were quite frightening and we had an example of how dangerous they were when our commander was murdered. Feeling herself in danger at night she kept a loaded pistol on the table by her bed. A Pole got into her room and shot her. It was not all sadness and work. When on duty we wore a sort of blue denim dress but in the evening our walking-out uniform was a smart, two-piece, brown costume.

‘One day the whole of our group was given marching orders. We were posted to Schweinfurt where we were to be trained on the 88mm anti-aircraft guns. From being farm girls we had become artillerymen. Our arrival in Schweinfurt was a shock. The air raid damage was terrible. Coming from eastern Austria we had suffered little from air raids and the damage to Schweinfurt depressed us for it showed how badly the war was going for Germany. Outside the station we were ordered to pick up our suitcases and march – there was no transport. We passed through what can only be described as a desert of brick ruins which had once been houses. There were very few undamaged houses standing. Most had been reduced to walls only a metre or two high.

‘Our conversion from farm-hands to gunners was soon completed. My first job was to take the three shells from a wicker container, fuze them and replace them. It got me used to the weight and feel of the 88mm shells. The RAD detachment was made up of both sexes. They boys fired the guns while we girls operated the searchlights or worked on the telephone link between the command post and the firing points. The barracks in which we lived had been dug into the ground as a sort of protection and only the roof projected above the ground. The men were in one barrack block and we girls were in another. A river separated the two sets of barracks. The raids came in by day and night and there seemed to be an air raid every day. We became very tired from lack of sleep, but the concentration upon our tasks kept us from thinking too much about the bombs that were falling. The daytime raids bombed whole areas – so called, carpet bombing. The night time ones aimed at specific targets. The carpet ones were the more frightening of the two. The experience of thousands of bombs exploding at the same time was a really frightening experience, even seen from a distance. Another hazard was that at this time [late 1944] American fighter aircraft escorted the bombers and fired their machine-guns at anything that moved on the roads or fields.

‘About the middle of March 1945, we learned that the American Army was approaching Schweinfurt and we all wondered what would happen. Would we be put into action as anti-tank gunners with the 88s? Some time later, it must have been April by this time, we were paraded and told by our CO that he was disbanding the unit. We could all go home. We had no discharge paper or pay – nothing, and those of us from southern Austria were

hundreds of miles from our home. My friend, Traute Ott, and I stood by the side of the road with our rucksacks on our backs, trying to hitch a lift. But no lorry would stop for us. We were RAD/Flakhelferinnen and the soldiers thought of us as "officers' mattresses". They would not stop for the likes of us. It was a wounded man who got us a lift. We saw him and bandaged his wounds. A lorry stopped to pick him up and we clambered aboard. Somewhere past Schweinfurt we caught a train and, alternatively riding on local trains and by walking, reached my home village of Gnas in eastern Austria. Almost immediately I left again. The Russians were close and stories were spreading of their terrible brutality and mistreatment of women. Most people in the village decided to leave and buried their valuables in their back gardens before trekking off to Graz.

'A friend from the village, Traude Schranz, and I went on past Graz, firstly to the little town of Koeflach and reached the village of Maria Lankowitz where we worked in the kitchens of the gasthaus in which we were living. It was there that we saw our first British soldiers and ate British Army rations. On 8th May Traude and I were nearly killed. The final cease-fire came into force at midnight and German units which had not reached the Allied zones of Austria were to be handed over to the Red Army. During the afternoon of the 8th there was a sudden thundering noise and a whole mass of riders came galloping through Maria Lankowitz heading for the demarcation line some miles away. These men were, so far as I recall, Galican SS, who would receive no pity from the Russians. They charged through the narrow streets of the village knocking down anyone who was not quick enough to escape them. Traude and I had to squeeze ourselves against the walls of the houses in order to avoid being trampled on.

'With the end of the war things settled down enough for us to return to Graz, firstly to see Traude's invalid mother and then to go on to our home village. We did not reach it because at Feldbach, some 10 miles away, the attitude of the Red Army men was menacing. A group of them followed us into the woods and their intention was clear. We were quite frightened of being raped and returned to Feldbach where we took the train back to Graz. It was not until July when the Red Army pulled out and the British Eighth Army occupied the county of Styria that we felt it safe enough to return home to eastern Styria. There we found that much of what had been buried had been dug up and stolen, but at least we were alive and the war was at an end. I had been on active service for years and yet I was not even 23 years old. What I had been through was enough for two lifetimes.'

## CRISIS IN THE LUFTWAFFE

From 1943, to the end of the war the burden of carrying the nation's effort fell more and more upon the army. Both the Luftwaffe and the Kriegsmarine were, in a strategic sense, on the defensive. Although both continued to mount offensive operations, with only limited and declining resources they had only a tactical role to play in the prosecution of the war.

In place of raids using masses of aircraft, which had been the feature of Luftwaffe activity during 1940 and 1941, most attacks upon the British Isles in 1944 were made by pilotless, rocket-propelled machines, the V 1, and then by long-range rockets, the V 2. German bomber strength faded away almost totally and Luftwaffe emphasis then concentrated upon building fighter aircraft to challenge the RAF and the USAF bombing offensive.

The introduction of the first jet engine in aviation history should have given the Germans an advantage in air-to-air combat, but Hitler, obsessed with the need for bomber aircraft, insisted that the Me 262 be adapted to carry a bomb load. That decision cost the Luftwaffe the advantage which that fast jet aircraft had over Allied machines. Late in the war the young and active leaders of the Luftwaffe – Goering was by that time only a cipher – began to build up a reserve of fighter machines and fuel. Their plan was to put a thousand fighters into the air in one mission to strike at and to destroy a whole division or 'box' of American heavy bombers. Galland and his subordinates were of the opinion that the frightful losses which such a mission would inflict upon the Americans would cause them to abandon their daylight raids. Hitler, learning of this fighter plane reserve, squandered it on one useless ground-support mission on New Year's Day 1945. The remnant were regrouped and deployed in an operation on 7 April 1945, but with so little effect that 8th Air Force did not even realize that this had been a major effort by the Luftwaffe.

Thereafter, with no fuel supplies for training purposes, new means had to be found to train pilots to fly against the Allied air invaders. Georg Cordts, one of Germany's principal aviation authors, was one of those who was trained in the last weeks of the war. Modestly, he wrote that his war service was so brief that nothing of interest happened. The reader may judge for himself the truth of Georg Cordt's disclaimer.

'The 'National Socialist Flying Corps' (NSFK), raised by a Führer decree of 17th April 1937, was placed directly under the control of the Minister of Aviation. Many pilots of the Second World War came to the Luftwaffe through the NSFK where they had received a thorough pre-Service training in flying gliders.

'Germany lost air superiority above the Reich late in 1943 and never recovered it. Discussions were held at senior Luftwaffe level on the question of fighter pilot replacement. One proposal discussed was whether sufficient

fighter pilot replacements could be obtained from glider schools. A scheme entitled "Fighter pilot replacement for special purposes" was proposed. Under this, intensive glider training would be given to selected candidates and this would enable them to pass directly from flying gliders to piloting the jet and rocket-propelled machines which were coming into service. Another question under discussion, whether pilots should be asked to fly what were in effect suicide missions, decided that pilots must be given some chance of survival. The "Natter" was also discussed. This was a rocket-propelled missile which the pilot aimed directly at the target before he ejected and parachuted to safety. The concept of a pilot lying horizontal while steering the plane towards its target, which was the method proposed for the Natter, was not a new one but had been found so difficult that it was not pursued.

In the rocket-driven Me 163 – the Komet – the NSFK leaders thought they had found the plane type they had been seeking. They were convinced that the Me 163 could be flown by trained glider pilots who had not necessarily flown motor-driven or jet-propelled aircraft. Experienced pilots disagreed, considering that training on powered aircraft must follow glider training. The commanders of the Luftwaffe's Fighter Arm, of whom Galland was one, accepted that the Komet aircraft landed like a glider, but argued that its take-off speed, in excess of 300kms/hr, demanded that if a pilot were to fly it successfully he must have had more than just glider training.

Despite this professional objection special courses to obtain "Fighter pilot replacements for special purposes" were organized and the selection of volunteers was carried out in all the 17 Groups of the NSFK. The Hitler Youth Flying units were a reservoir of volunteers each of whom had certificates of proficiency at A, B and C levels, and who had ambitions to become fighter pilots. This flying élite, perhaps no more than a few hundred men, went on courses in Brunn-Medlan, Lauch and finally in Trebbin. These prospective Komet pilots underwent extensive glider courses and the first lesson which had to be mastered was the ability to land their machines at a specified aerodrome. Training which had been carried out on a standard glider was completed on a 'Habicht' machine whose wing span had been reduced to 8 metres in order to increase its landing speed approximately to that of the Me 163. The prospective pilots then went on to familiarization flights in a towed Me 163A or 163B. Despite this intensive training there was no case known where the pilots, having completed this special course, went immediately on operations with the Luftwaffe. The 163 had flown a number of successful missions during 1945 and had proved its ability, but fuel shortage required that the available machines be piloted by the best Luftwaffe airmen. Production of the aircraft was halted during February.

A call came for pilots to fly the 'Volksjaeger'; the He 162. This machine, which was powered by a single unit, went into production although it was

inferior in performance to the twin-powered Me 262. Saur, the senior Civil Servant in the Armaments Ministry's main department, envisaged the Volksjaeger rolling off the assembly lines in large numbers. Under his influence Keller, the Corps Commander of the NSKF, promised all the men and workshops of the Corps to support the new project. It was proposed to take one specific Hitler Youth age group, to train the volunteers on gliders and then, without intermediate training on powered aircraft, to put them into action in the available He 162. Training in marksmanship would be given on the ground.

"The fighter pilot ace, Baumbach, was able to convince Axmann, leader of the Hitler Youth, that Saur's intention was absolute madness. To fly the Volksjaeger required fighter pilot training. As if to emphasize Baumbach's argument for such training, Galland and Keller were witnesses to a furious air battle being fought out above an airfield which they were visiting. Suddenly an Me 262 dropped vertically and crashed. Its pilot was Nowotny, an ace with 250 "kills". The question did not need to be asked; if so experienced a pilot could be shot down, what chance would the totally untrained boys of the Hitler Youth have? Nevertheless, the intention to man the Volksjaeger with "Fighter pilot replacement for Special purposes" continued, this being in the words of Ernst Heinkel, the aircraft designer, ". . . a demonstration of the misguided fanaticism of those years".

"The first He 162 was ready for action on 6th December 1944. For the purposes of pilot familiarization a few machines were built without propulsion units and were towed like gliders. I put the question to General Galland whether the development of the Me 163 and Me 262 could have changed the course of the war. Galland admitted that they might have prolonged it, but could not have affected the end result.

"The confusion which existed in Nazi Germany towards the end of the war was responsible for the fact that the training of "Fighter pilot replacements for special purposes", continued, one might almost say until Russian tanks rolled on to Trebbin airfield. The final course in Brunn ran until 19th March, and those in Laucha and Trebbin until 20th April. When Brunn was no longer operational the trainee-pilots went to Laucha and then on to Trebbin. The pilot courses were finally halted and training given in fire-arms, hand weapons and panzerfausts. On 20th April, the group was sent to fight in Berlin. Some trainees met tragic ends. They flew low-level missions in old fashioned Buecker aircraft fitted with four panzerfausts. Their targets were the Soviet tank columns. All were shot down and of the four, whose aircraft crashed in flames, one made his way back to the unit. Some trainees reached north-western Germany and stayed there until the end of the war. Others, of whom I was one, were posted to "Jahn" Division which was surrounded near Potsdam. The division was rescued by Wenck's Twelfth Army. It then went into action again, this time to hold the last remaining bridgehead on

the Elbe, so as to cover the rear of Busse's Ninth Army and hold open an escape route for refugees from eastern Germany. Thus ended the "Fighter Pilot replacements for special purposes".'

## SELF-SACRIFICE OF THE KRIEGSMARINE

In 1943, the Kriegsmarine was a spent force. Its surface fleet, although made up of new ships, had never been able to operate cohesively. From the loss of *Graf Spee* in 1939 and then *Bismarck* in 1941, the major units had had bad luck. Some capital ships remained and were put into action. *Scharnhorst*, together with *Tirpitz* and ten destroyers, attacked Allied installations at Spitzbergen during September 1943, but *Tirpitz* was herself attacked by midget submarines only a week or two later and was badly damaged. *Scharnhorst* came out of Altenfiord on Christmas Eve, with the intention of attacking Allied convoys sailing to Murmansk. Two days later she was intercepted and sunk off the North Cape. Her loss removed the last major surface threat to Allied convoys on the North Russia route.

With its capital ships sunk, crippled or bottled up in harbour, the Kriegsmarine was reduced to producing small craft in order to take the war to the British enemy. Basing their ideas on Italian and British types, the German Navy introduced, as a first weapon, manned torpedoes which had the disadvantage that they asphyxiated their crewman. These dangerous craft were succeeded by motor-boats which exploded among enemy ships and then by one-man submarines. In every case successes were few and losses were high.

The main emphasis of Kriegsmarine activities remained, as it had from the beginning of the war, with the U-boat fleet. Submarines operating either individually or in packs had sunk millions of tons of Allied shipping. But the Allied navies had not been passive. Improved tactics, long-range aircraft and new inventions had helped them to meet and then to master the U-boat menace and their success is acknowledged in an entry of the War Diary of the Commander of U-Boats dated 6 May 1943:

'The enemy's sound detection equipment [the Germans still thought in terms of acoustic weapons] both in aircraft and on surface vessels, does not merely limit the operations of a single ship [U-boat]. More seriously it enables the enemy to discover the preparations made by and the dispositions of U-boat [packs] and how to avoid them. It is thus possible for them to nullify the U-boat's most important advantage, its undetectability. The enemy air force is also now able to cover almost the entire area of the North Atlantic to protect the convoys.'

Allied counter-measures so reduced the scale of U-boat operations that, whereas in the first months of 1943, nearly 120 vessels had been operating



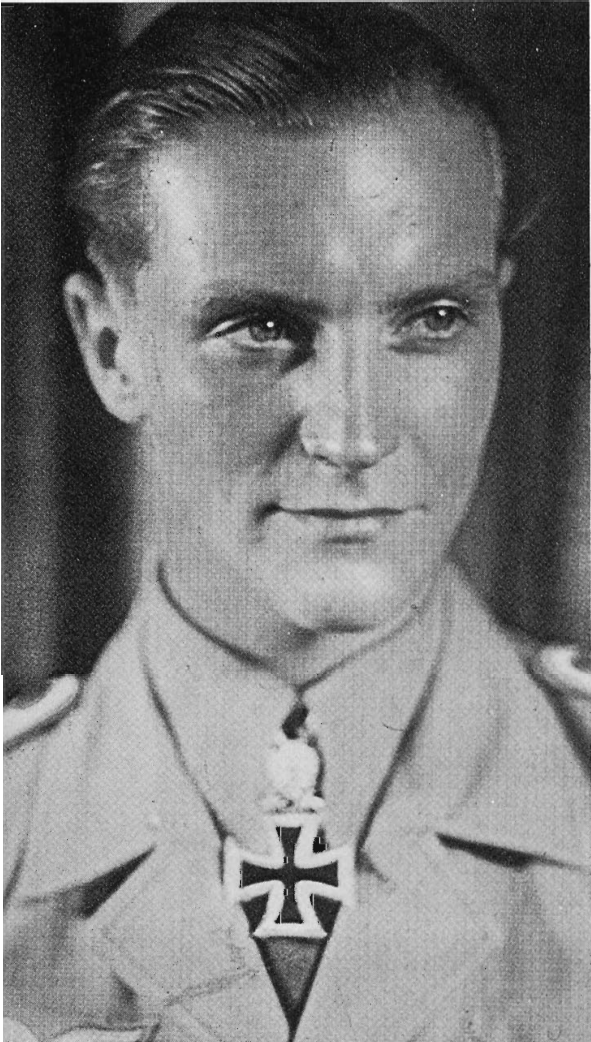
*Above: Hans Teske served with 5th Parachute Regiment in Tunisia, where he saved the life of a British soldier in February 1943.*

*Right: Heinrich Benz (left) who served in No. 12 Company of the same regiment as Hans Teske. This photograph was taken at Medjez el Bab in December 1942.*

*Top right: Reinhold Hoffman was taken prisoner in Tunisia and sent to a punishment camp in the desert where he remained until August 1947. (R. Hoffman)*

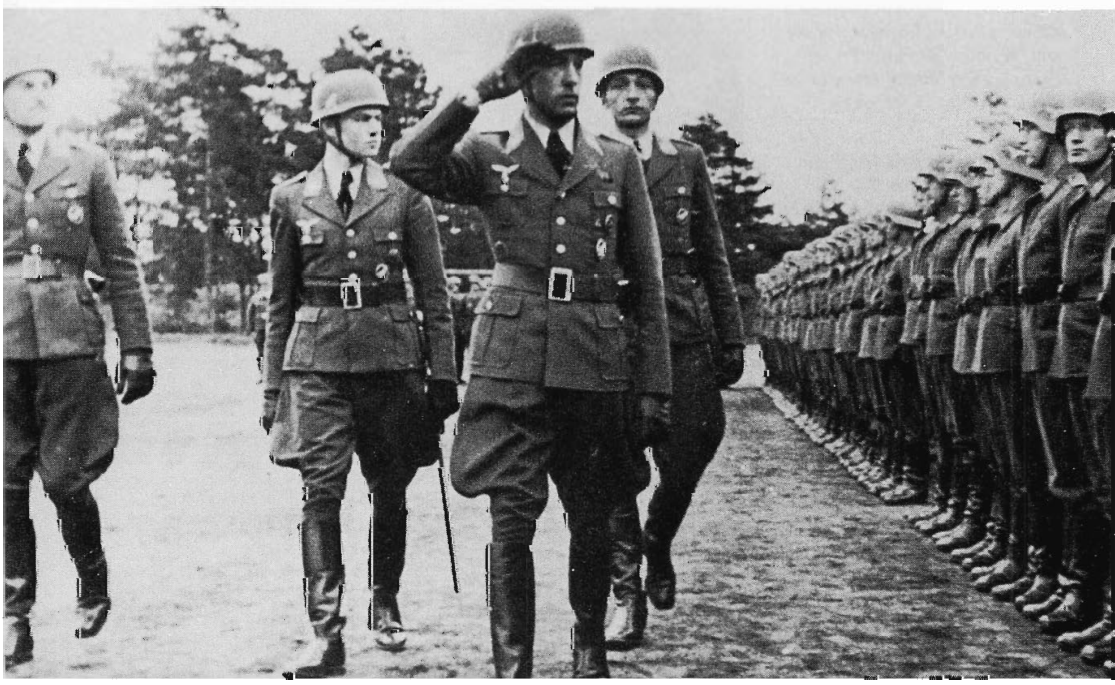






*Left: Hans-Joachim Marseille, the Luftwaffe ace known as the 'Star of Africa'. He was killed in a flying accident, having gained 158 victories.*

*Above: Although conscription existed in Germany, the authorities were reluctant to use it to bring women into the services and preferred to rely upon voluntary enlistment. Recruiting posters such as this one invited women to work for victory.*





*Above: Towards the end of the war, pressure grew for women to become more involved. Traute Kren, neé Auer, served with a flak unit in Schweinfurt; the photograph shows her in Gnas, Austria, before leaving for her military service.*

*Top right: Traute Auer (left) and Traude Schranz (right) who were nearly knocked down by a fleeing SS cavalry unit on the last day of the war.*

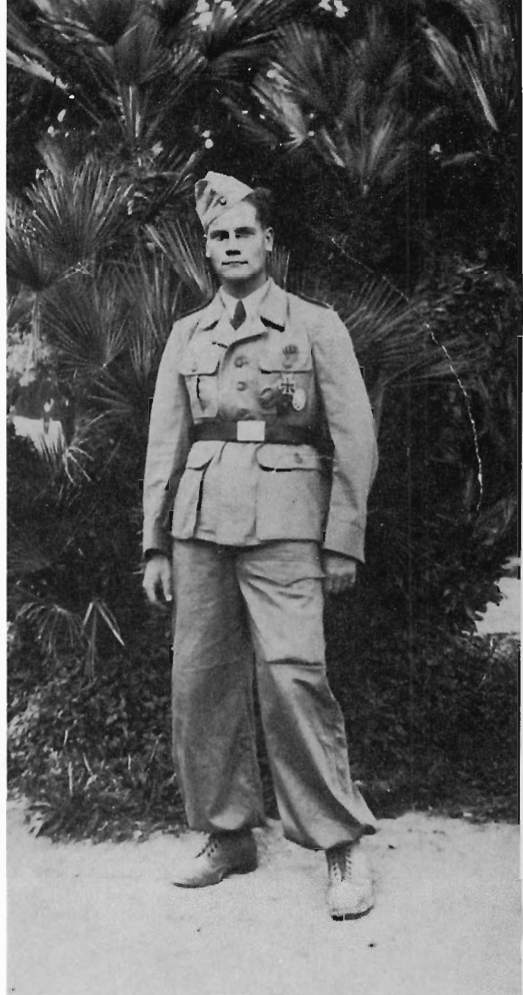
*Right: Luftwaffe Flakhelferinnen operated the searchlights during air raids. Traute Kren worked on just such a site at Schweinfurt.*

*Left: Captain Hans Jungwirth, Hans Teske's commanding officer in Tunisia, 1943.*





*Above: Gerd-Dietrich Schneider, here seen in the rank of Oberleutnant zur See, when he was in command of No.8 Gun Platform Flotilla. He is wearing the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, which was awarded to him on 4 October 1944, in recognition of his services in north-west European waters during July, August and September 1944.*



*Above: Adolf Strauch in Naples, 1943, shortly before a planned operation in North Africa which was later aborted. He is wearing his tunic with the Iron Cross 1st Class, the wounded badge, infantry assault badge, and paratroop qualification badge.*



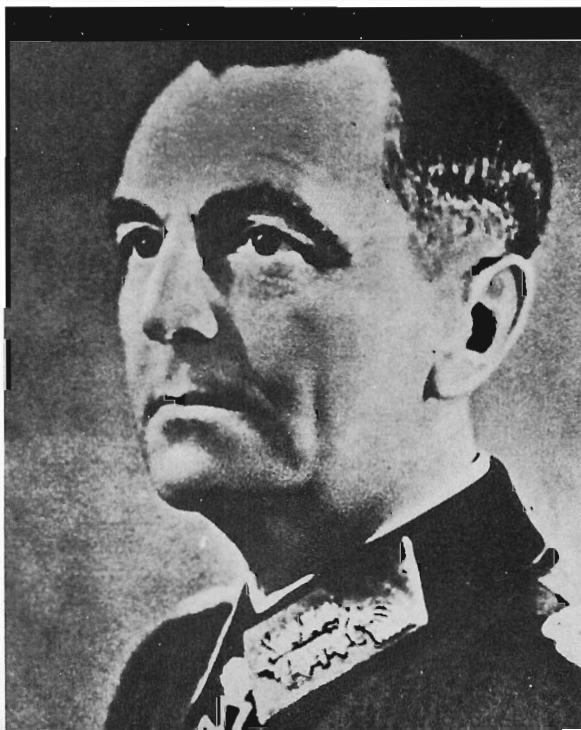


*Left: The stripped-down hulk of the R 35, described by Gerd-Dietrich Schneider, shortly after passing through the Golden narrows in Regensburg; summer 1942.*

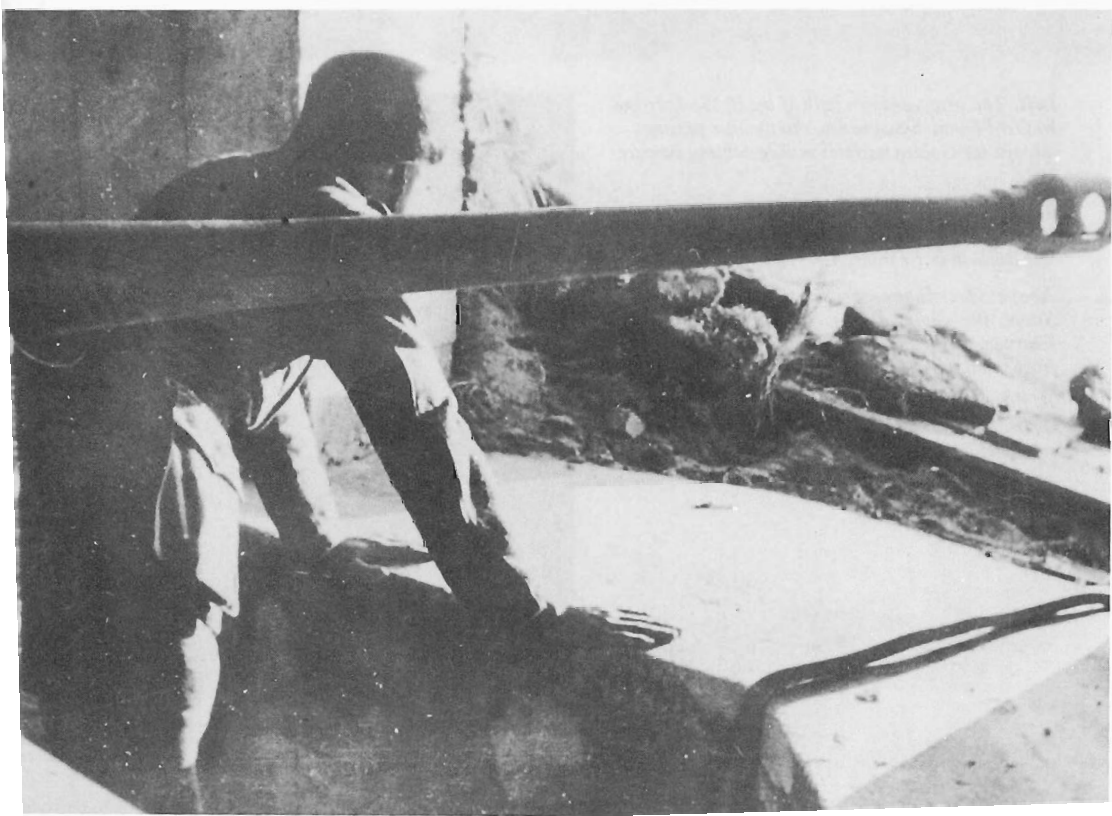
*Top: Heavy machine-gun group of No. 12 Company of Deutschland Regiment march into positions near Vel Burlouk in February 1943.*

*Above: One of the columns of German soldiers of Sixth Army captured when Stalingrad fell in February 1943. Only a small number ever returned from captivity.*

*Right: General, later Field Marshal, Paulus commanding Sixth Army, which was forced to surrender at Stalingrad against Hitler's wishes.*







**Right:** In spring 1944 von Rundstedt (right), Supreme Commander West, visited the Hitler Youth Division, which was being worked up to combat efficiency by officers such as Meyer (left) and Witt (centre).



**Opposite page, top left:** General Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin who commanded the German troops defending Monte Cassino.

**Opposite page, top right:** Colonel August Freiherr von der Heydte commanded 6th Fallschirmjäger Regiment in Normandy and led the unit that dropped in the Ardennes during the Battle of the Bulge.

**Opposite page, bottom:** A German soldier coastwatching from a bunker in the Atlantic Wall, Normandy.



**Right:** The Allied invasion fleet as seen through the range-finder of a German armoured fighting vehicle on D-Day, 6 June 1944.

**Right:** Men of Baron von der Heydte's 6th Parachute Regiment and SS Division Goetz von Berlichingen take their wounded to a first-aid post in Normandy.





*Above: Michael Wittmann of 101st SS Heavy Tank Battalion was considered to be the finest tank commander in any army during the Second World War.*

*Above right: Wittmann and Balthasar Woll, a member of his Tiger tank crew. On 13 June 1944 Wittmann and his Tiger were instrumental in halting the advance of the British 22nd Armoured Brigade (7th Armoured Division) by destroying 25 vehicles in half an hour on the road outside Villers Bocage, Normandy.*

*Below: A heavily camouflaged Tiger tank of 101st Heavy SS Panzer Battalion. Concealment was*



*essential to avoid the attention of Allied aircraft, which dominated the skies.*

*Opposite page, top: A Panther tank making its way through the rubble-strewn streets of Caen in July 1944.*

*Opposite page, bottom left: General of the SS Hausser, GOC Seventh Army, on a visit to the TAC HQ of General Meindl, GOC Parachute Corps. The tall officer is Lieutenant-Colonel Blauensteiner, Meindl's chief of staff.*

*Opposite page, bottom right: Major Stephani, commanding officer of 9th Parachute Regiment.*









*Above: A scene in one of the country roads in the Falaise area, with burning and knocked out German vehicles abounding.*

*Left: One of the weapons with which Hitler tried to win the war was the V-1, a pilotless, rocket-propelled bomb. The first of these fell on the United Kingdom shortly after D-Day.*

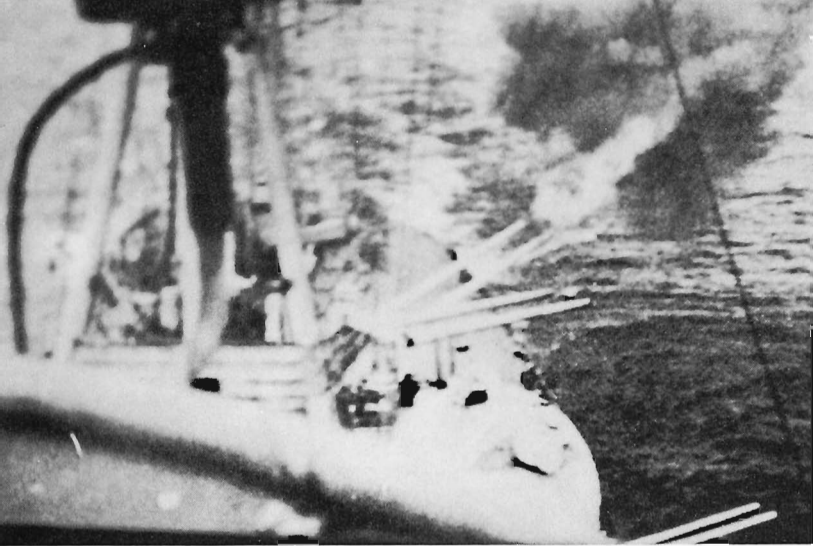
*Opposite page, top: Men of the Volkssturm parading in Berlin during the autumn of 1944. Most of them are armed with single-shot Panzerfaust anti-tank rockets.*

*Opposite page, bottom left: Kapitän zur See Reinicke, commander of the cruiser Prinz Eugen.*

*Opposite page, bottom right: In an effort to sustain morale in the latter days of the war, the German Propaganda Ministry mounted live radio concerts using popular artists. This picture shows one of these 'Wunschkonzerte'.*







*Left: The after turrets of Prinz Eugen as she fires on targets on the Sworbe Peninsula in 1944.*



*Centre left: American prisoners, taken captive during the Battle of the Bulge, passing by a panzer from Jochen Peiper's battalion.*



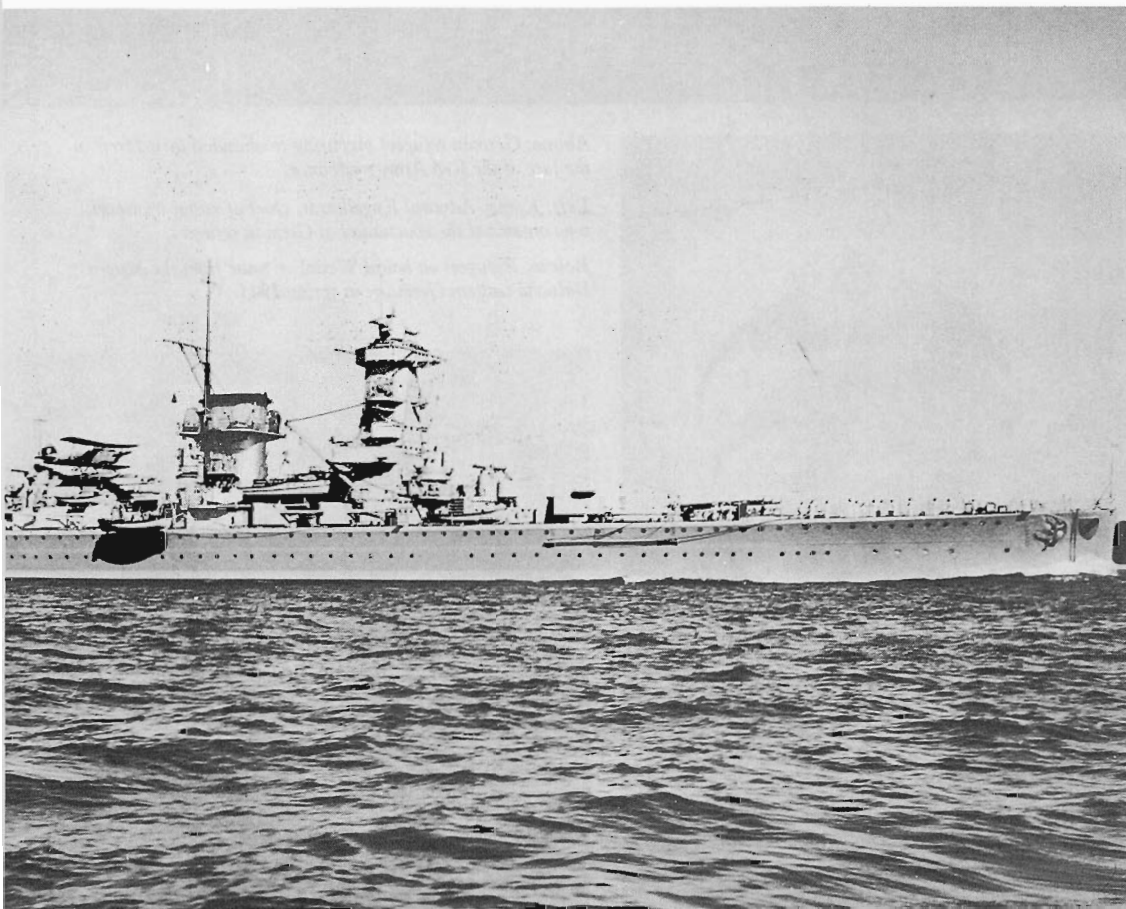
*Bottom left: Josef Goebbels, the Reichs Minister for Propaganda, with a group of newly decorated winners of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. The badges on the arm of the officer in the centre of the picture show that he has knocked out four tanks in close-quarter combat.*



*Right: Eva Braun, second from the left, at a party in the Berghof, Bavaria. The SS officer standing next to her is Fegelein, who was shot in Berlin for deserting his post in the Führer's bunker.*



*Below: Admiral Scheer was one of the ships involved in the naval operations in the Baltic at the end of the war intended to hold off the Red Army while German refugees were transported to western Germany.*







*Above: German refugees preparing to abandon their farms in the face of the Red Army's advance.*

*Left: Konter-Admiral Engelhardt, chief of naval transport, who organized the evacuation of German refugees.*

*Below: Refugees on board Wedel en route from the eastern Baltic to western Germany in spring 1945.*



*Right: The capsized hulk of Admiral Scheer in Kiel harbour following a raid by the RAF in 1945.*



*Right: A column of surrendered Luftwaffe personnel in north Germany, May 1945. (Imperial War Museum)*



*Right: Field Police were held in groups behind the front lines to collect stragglers and men whose units had been destroyed in battle. Those survivors were formed into battle groups and put back in action. The picture shows a collecting point in Hungary during the spring offensive of 1945.*





*Left: The scene in the inner courtyard of the Reichskanzlei in Berlin shortly after the city fell to the Russians. (Imperial War Museum)*



*Left: At the end of the war, civil authority broke down in some German cities. These civilians are looting foodstuffs from goods trains. (Imperial War Museum)*



*Left: German civilians standing in front of their ruined houses read the first edition of a newspaper published by the Allied forces to inform them that the struggle is all over. (Imperial War Museum)*

in the North Atlantic, by the middle of May that number had been reduced to less than a hundred. Doenitz was forced to break off the battle until he could re-equip with boats with quieter engines and able to stay submerged for longer periods. The measure of Allied success lies in the fact that by the end of the war 739 U-boats had been lost with all hands. Nearly 30,000 of the 40,000 of its men perished; the highest percentage casualty rate in any arm of service.

## JOURNEY TO THE BLACK SEA

The last great effort of the Kriegsmarine, the rescue of the civilians and soldiers from the east, is recorded later in this book, but before we reach that chapter of self-sacrifice let us go back in time to 1942, when, as a result of the first successes of Army Group South, the German forces had reached the Black Sea. It was not enough that the army held the ground. The strong Soviet Black Sea Fleet needed to be countered at sea. There was a problem in that German shipbuilding capacity was unable to produce new vessels for such operations and craft had to be taken from existing flotillas. Gerd-Dietrich Schneider, commanding a minesweeper in the Channel, recalled the order and its consequences.

‘Towards the end of February 1942, our flotilla was ordered to transfer immediately from the Channel ports and proceed to Cuxhaven. Then came a more astonishing order. Our ultimate destination was to be the Black Sea, a move which would reduce quite seriously the strength of our naval forces in the Channel. At the beginning of April 1942, we arrived in Cuxhaven flying the customary “paying-off” pennant to show that we were returning from overseas service. Our short auxiliary mast was really too low to fly the 20-metres-long pennant correctly, but we did our best.

‘To reach the Black Sea would require that part of the journey be made overland with the ships being carried on the autobahn between Dresden and Ingolstadt. The superstructure on each ship was removed to lower the height so that it could pass under the autobahn bridges. This reduction in height also brought down the vessel’s gross weight to a more easily transportable 65 tons. The removal of the ship’s engines and the propellers brought our weight down still further to a more manageable load, although those removals brought with them the disadvantage that during the “wet” parts of our journey we would be unmanoeuvrable and would have to be towed. One amusing thing was that civilians in Cuxhaven, seeing our ships with their superstructures removed thought they were some sort of aircraft carrier.

‘The heavy equipment had been taken out, but an auxiliary diesel engine and a battery were left on board for the comfort and convenience of the group which would accompany the ship during the “dry” parts of its journey. The



first two ships of our flotilla, the *R 166*, Horst Mertineit's vessel and my own *R 35*, were towed out on the morning of 31st March by a sea-going tug. At Hamburg it left us with the news that a river tug would shortly arrive to take us on the next leg of the journey. That vessel did not arrive until May 2nd, and when it did it was already towing two stripped-down Luftwaffe security ships. The manoeuvring required to get four ships ready for towing took some time, but eventually we were all set and then the tug, with a fine plume of smoke pouring out of its funnel, took us upstream. By the end of the second day we had reached Magdeburg. The Luftwaffe authorities had given their crews ration cards but neither food for the journey nor sufficient drinking water. The airmen had to rely upon the navy to supply their needs. After an interesting, not to say picturesque five-day journey, we tied up in the Albert Docks in Dresden. The steamship company responsible for organizing the next part of our trip had considerable experience in moving ships overland but our hopes of being quickly en route were dashed. We were told that there would be a delay of some three weeks before we could be dealt with because the ships of No 1 E-boat Flotilla had still not been loaded and dispatched. Dresden in the early summer of 1942, showed none of the signs of war as did the ports of northern Germany. There was a naval quartermaster's store in the town and as we had been in action against England our crew had totted up enough "Channel service time" to qualify for three months' special rations. We lived on the highest ration scale and enjoyed such extras as extra meat, real coffee, chocolate, tobacco and alcohol. Our travel permits also allowed us to use express trains so that even those living as far away as East Prussia could get home on leave.

'In order that we did not lose touch with naval routine a ten-man crew was kept on board and was rotated regularly. But soon the pleasant time in Dresden was at an end and shortly before Whitsun our sister ship, the *R 166*, was made ready. We could see from the difficulties she was having what needed to be done. The problem was that our ships were all wood construction not steel. They would not be able to stand up to the strain of an overland journey unless they were given special protection. This was in the form of elastic suspension; a number of bands about 2 metres wide, cushioned with timber baulks. These slings were fastened to a low form of scaffolding called a "Trog" which resembled an upended railway bridge. The Trog was over 40 metres long and was mounted on a number of heavy lorry wheel bases each consisting of eight rubber wheels mounted on four axles. All the wheels were steered by two drivers, one at the front and one at the back of the Trog. The drivers, were linked by telephone. Two powerful lorries driving side by side pulled the giant framework carrying the ship and another two at the back pushed it. There was a third lorry, a sort of Command vehicle, driving independently at the front.

'We were loaded on to the Trog in Ubigau on the broad and flat right bank of the Elbe and it took all our efforts and those of a Company of military convalescents to winch the vessel the 30 metres from the river to the lorries. On the second day the "corsets", the five, wide, carrying bands were fitted and screwed into position. The ship lay suspended on these, not held rigid but able to swing gently. Some parts of the keel had to be sawn off in order that the ship lay properly in the slings. Once she had been loaded and secured the "Trog" was covered with sheeting to hide the identity of the cargo. The "dry" part of the trip lay ahead and next stop would be Ingolstadt where the remainder of the crew was to rejoin the ship. The journey along the autobahn from the Elbe to the Danube took five days with the speed being restricted to a walking pace. The police closed those parts of the road along which the convoy was driving and at night two of our NCOs guarded the ship.

'One of the chief difficulties encountered was that the height of the bridges across the autobahn was not constant and often clearance was reckoned to be less than 15cms. One of the pieces of equipment which we carried was a high-pressure hydraulic pump because in those days it was possible to raise the bridge height by hydraulic means. One phenomenon of the trip was a vast build-up of static electricity with the result that workers in Ingolstadt who clambered on to the Trog received sharp electric shocks. We "earthed" the construction with a short length of chain. Our organization was so good that we kept to our timetable and those of us returning to the ship from Berlin arrived as the "corsets" were being taken off.

'By the afternoon of our arrival in Ingolstadt our ship, *R 35*, was afloat once again, but now it was sailing on the fast-running waters of the Danube. During the following morning a motor tug arrived. This was about the size of a naval pinnace. We could not believe that this miniature vessel was strong enough to tow us down stream, but we soon learned differently. Passing under the Danube bridges was an exciting experience because the river at this point is not navigable by large vessels and even though we had no superstructure we still rode high out of the water. As we passed under those bridges the crew members had to lie flat so that they were not swept off the ship and into the water. We reached Weltenburg where we were supposed to tie up for the night, but found there was neither a pier nor anchoring facilities. Our mini-tug pushed us on to a sand bank and two of the crew jumped ashore and tied us to a tree. The beer brewed by the monks of the Benedictine abbey of Weltenburg went down very well. It was here that we learned that a ship of our flotilla had encountered Field Marshal Goering who was surprised to see this unusual construction on the autobahn. The whole route was explained to him and the difficulties of passing under the bridges pointed out. He is said to have remarked, "Well, let's blow up the bridges," and he probably meant it. It was explained to him that these were protected

by the Fine Arts Commission and, in any case, the ship had got that far without having to blow anything up.

'Beyond Regensburg the Danube is navigable and we made good time although fog delayed us and was responsible for the unique entry in a naval war diary: "0830 hours, Anchored in the mouth of the River Isar owing to fog." We reached Linz and there the superstructure was refitted and the engine replaced so that, once again, we were a warship. The refit took eight days after which we carried out trials on the Danube. Trying to find a stretch of the river wide enough to turn was one problem. Another was that although the ship had been held in "corsets" during the "dry" stage of the journey there had been some shrinkage. Being of wood construction she was not rigid like a metal ship and, in addition, she had dried out. This meant that when the main engines were fitted and the steering mechanism installed the mounting holes no longer matched up. New ones had to be bored, a necessary task even though the differences were of millimetres only. When we reached the Black Sea the ship's shape had righted itself so that the new borings created difficulties and the speeds that we had formerly reached could no longer be attained. One more day of refitting and then we were ready to sail. Together with *R 166* we set out from Melk to Vienna, spurred on by the flotilla commander's cry, "Sevastapol is waiting!" We were still having to be towed, not because we lacked power, but because of the strict regulations regarding traffic on the Danube. The large upper deck of the towing vessel was used for training and pleasurable pursuits. Less pleasurable was the knowledge that below decks there were 500 tons of bombs, en route to Bulgaria for onward transhipment to Greece.

'Our progress along the Danube was slow and when the flotilla commander asked why he was told that the varying depths of the river bed made high speeds impossible. In Budapest we were not anchored outside the city, as was the custom, but directly opposite the Parliament building. For this singular honour the crew wore their best parade uniforms. Our next port of call was Semlin near Belgrade where we were fitted with twin machine-guns to counter Yugoslav partisan activities. The so-called "cataracts" section of the Danube was the final difficulty, with the river pilot sitting on the roof of the wheelhouse and passing orders to another pilot who then relayed them to our coxswain. For this section we were not towed, but we minesweepers sailed tied together in what were called 'packets'. We passed through the narrow channel filled with roaring water and then entered into tranquil water on a quiet stretch of the river. One last, natural and unexpected phenomenon was the "Kossova" a very strong wind which blew up during the night and which tossed us about on high waves. The gale-force winds and the pouring rain caused us a number of anxious hours when the moorings parted, but we switched on our searchlights and managed to tie up. Our convoy broke up at Ruscuk where the river was in high flood. Although we had maps of the

Danube delta the water had risen over the river banks obscuring landmarks and making it impossible to tell whether we were sailing in the river or on the flood water. The answer to my question on how we were to navigate was, "Just steer round the houses."

'Eleven days after leaving Linz we arrived at the Roumanian port of Galatz. From there we steamed along the central arm of the Danube and reached Constanza, the main port. En route we exchanged signals with a pair of German warships going back up river and then, at last, completed the final stage of our journey and reached the Black Sea where our Flotilla Commander sent the signal "Thalassa!, Thalassa" [the Sea!, the Sea!].'

## AFRICAN SIDESHOW

The Germans did not see the campaign in Africa in the same light as we did. Britain fought to maintain an Imperial link, a lifeline to the Far Eastern Empire. To OKW it was never more than a minor operation which became a sideshow once the Russian war opened. It is, perhaps, because of its low military importance that no histories have been produced by any of the German divisions that fought the campaign and yet what they achieved brought credit to the German forces.

German intervention in Africa came at a time when there was no military activity on the European mainland, and this campaign in Mussolini's colonies soon captured the imagination of the German public. They were captivated by the dynamism with which the operations were conducted, by a commander who had personal magnetism, who was a Master of the Field and enjoyed a great measure of good luck. That man was Erwin Rommel.

Hitler's decision to send a military force arose from his fear that Italy would lose her North African Empire and that that loss would take her out of the war as an ally of the Third Reich. General Ritter von Thoma was sent by OKW on a tour of inspection to determine the most effective methods of shipping and deploying German troops in this new theatre of operations. Von Thoma's report concluded, 'In the event of German formations being sent to Africa, then this must be a panzer force no fewer than four divisions strong. It would be pointless to send fewer because a smaller number could not achieve success. Conversely, it would serve no purpose to send more, since it would not be possible to supply more than four divisions in any advance across the desert to the Nile Delta.'

That last sentence contains the essence of military success in the desert. This depended upon supply and reinforcement, which in turn meant possession of the principal ports between Tripolitania and Egypt. Tobruk was the most important harbour in the battle area and the efforts to seize and to hold that place determined the strategy of the entire campaign.

Günther Rolf served in a lorried infantry regiment on the establishment of a panzer Division.

'I reached the desert as a replacement early in March 1942, having made a sea crossing from Sicily to Tripoli and then by lorry up the Via Balbia towards the Front. We did not need to become acclimatized because it was still not too hot during the day.

'Before the offensive opened [May–June 1942] we were briefed on Rommel's intentions. The chief aim was to capture Tobruk which had been surrounded a year earlier but which had not fallen. Our training was geared towards taking out the concrete defences of the fortified town in all-out assault. One part of the defensive system was a deep and wide anti-tank ditch. The Pioneers did a really heroic task in laying bridges across the ditch over which the panzer crossed with us immediately behind them. There was a lot of dust, so much that I thought there was a *Ghibli* blowing. The fog was so thick that our officers worked on compass bearings to locate the objectives we had to take out. Then we went into action. The battle was short but hard.

'When Tobruk fell the British ration stores fell into our hands undamaged. We were all impressed at the quantity and quality of British Army rations. They had marvellous tinned fruit from their colonies, various sorts of jam, corned beef – lots of corned beef – and meat and vegetable stew. We had, by comparison, very poor rations and when our own supplies did not come through we had to rely upon the Italian Army's hard tack; tinned meat embossed with the initials "A.M." (*Amministrazione Militare*) which we preferred to call *Arme Mussolini* [poor Mussolini] or *Alter Mann* [old man].'

Thomas Schulze wrote:

'I was in the desert with 8th Panzer Regiment and was nearly drowned there. This happened towards the end of November 1941. Almost out of the blue it began to rain. The Italians told us later it had not rained in that area for sixty years. It was as if one was under a very strong shower spout. The rain went on for a long time. I was with a motorized infantry battalion near Halfaya Pass and the wadis there quickly filled with water that poured down the walls of the Pass. I was busy helping to dig our trucks out of the mud which the rain had caused when I slipped and fell into a water-filled wadi and was taken rapidly away by the force of the flood. I cannot say that my past life flashed in front of my eyes. I remember being more annoyed at the fact that I was in such a grotesque position – in a flooded wadi in what was normally a dry desert. My comrades formed a chain and dragged me out.'

Günther Resch was in a Supply battalion, driving a truck in the offensive of May–June 1942.

'During the battle to capture Tobruk I was in the same sector as Flak Regiment 135. Reports came in that a British tank force was coming up out

of the desert. I can still see that scene. The Tommies were deployed in line abreast, advancing, then halting to fire and then advancing again. It was like a sea battle because each tank threw up a cloud of dust that looked like smoke from a funnel. There were more British tanks than we had panzer to oppose them and things looked black for us. I do not know whether the British knew it, but TAC HQ of Afrika Korps was only a short distance from where we were positioned. Then I saw a three-gun battery of 88mm anti-aircraft guns line up on the flat surface of the desert and open fire. Within a matter of minutes the British had lost more than twenty of their tanks. The rest turned away. Colonel Wolz of the Flak regiment was awarded the Knight's Cross for what he did that day.

'We who fought in Africa were also very proud of Gefreite [Corporal] Huebner, who served in another flak regiment and was, like Wolz, awarded the Knight's Cross for bravery in action. This happened very early in the campaign during the first advance to Halfaya Pass. A group of 30 British tanks approached the position where Huebner's gun was dug in, but then retreated when the battery opened fire on them. A few hours later seventy tanks began an attack. Huebner alone destroyed eleven of them in a few minutes. A third British tank attack came in during the early afternoon. For this a group of forty machines advanced and then divided so as to split German fire. Huebner opened fire at 800 metres and closed at 8 metres when a Mark II was knocked out almost at the edge of the gun pit. Later that afternoon eighty-five tanks attacked the four 88s of Huebner's group, but the arrival of panzer from our 5th Light Division saved Huebner and his comrades from certain death and destruction.'

The importance of Tobruk to operations in the desert has already been touched upon. Rommel's failure to capture the town in the spring of 1941, led to Operation 'Hercules', a plan designed at the start of 1942, to take out Malta by airborne assault, for it was an unsinkable aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean, lying athwart the Axis line of communications to Africa. Student, the Para Corps commander, was called to Rome where he found one of his subordinates, Ramcke, already waiting to brief him on the proposed plan. Ramcke had raised and trained a division of Italian paratroops, the Folgore Division, and planned to use them in the combined German/Italian air drop. Mussolini was so keen for Malta to be taken that he promised to support the airborne attack by committing the entire Italian Fleet. General Student was ordered to report to Führer Headquarters to brief Hitler and found him in a pessimistic mood. 'The building of a bridgehead on Malta using your airborne forces is guaranteed,' Hitler told him. 'What I also guarantee is the following. As soon as the attack goes in the British Fleets will sail from Alexandria and from Gibraltar. Do you know what the Italians will do? As soon as the first reports come in, they will run back to port, warships and transports alike. And you and your paras will be left

sitting on the island alone.' The capture of Tobruk by Rommel in the June 1942 offensive made Operation 'Hercules' redundant, but by this time British military power had been built up for a major offensive and control of operations in the desert had passed to the British. The offensive which Montgomery launched has passed into history as the Battle of El Alamein and its outcome destroyed Rommel's hopes of a victory in Africa.

That battle, fought in October–November 1942, forced the Axis armies to retreat. Shortly after it ended an Anglo-American force invaded French North Africa, nearly 1,500 miles to the north-west. The Allies raced towards Tunis, aware that if they could seize the capital they would have cut off Rommel's Panzer Army which was, at that time, retreating towards southern Tunisia. The Germans were just as aware as the Allies of the importance of Tunisia and sent over a miscellany of units to create and hold a bridgehead in that country. Among the units which were locally raised to increase Axis fighting strength were such unusual ones as local native volunteers and 361st Afrika Regiment, a unit made up of two battalions of former Foreign Legionnaires who were German nationals. 'I do not know what you thought of your allies,' continued Günther Resch, 'but ours were useless. A whole Italian division, the 6th, surrendered in the desert with all their arms and vehicles. The men of "Tunisia" Battalion, an Arab unit, deserted to the enemy or just vanished into the hills as did a battalion of Algerians and an Italian machine-gun battalion.'

## KILLING ON CHRISTMAS MOUNTAIN

One hastily created German unit was the 334th Division, which was put into the perimeter to the west of Tunis and which occupied a strategically important hill, known to the British as Longstop and to the Germans as the Christmas Mountain. There were three passes which led into the plain of Tunis the most important of which was that which went along the foot of Christmas Mountain. This feature was more than three kilometres long and 300 metres high. Whoever held it dominated operations around Medjez el Bab, which was itself the 'key to the Gate' of Tunis. Christmas Mountain was garrisoned by Battle Group Lang consisting of a battalion each from the 60th and the 754th Infantry Regiments. The German garrison held the mountain until the last weeks of the campaign in Tunisia. Heinrich Stolz:

'My infantry regiment was part of 334th Division which was raised during the autumn of 1942. We left Germany for Naples, then crossed to Sicily and arrived in Bizerta after a terrible sea journey. On 22nd December, as soon as the battalion had grouped, we moved off to take up positions to the west of Tunis, in the area of Medjez el Bab. Our battalion TAC HQ was set up near a great mountain which we knew as the Christmas Mountain.

That mountain was the key to the whole campaign and it was fought for during Christmas week of 1942, hence its name. The slopes were captured by the British, but their advance was held in a mine-field which we had hastily laid and they were then saturated with fire from our machine-guns and mortars. They tried again to take the hill – it was really two peaks, Jebel Ahmera and Jebel el Rhana – but we flung them back. Then bad weather brought the fighting to a halt and gave us the opportunity to improve our dug-outs and trenches. By the end of January 1943, the whole of 334th Division had arrived and was in the line. During February our 2nd Battalion, which had been in position on Christmas Hill, was relieved by a battalion of Gebirgsjaeger.’

My very good friend, Hans Teske, was a paratrooper with 5th Regiment and records one particular memory of the campaign:

‘At dawn on 28th February, I was ordered to take some wireless equipment to our forward positions just north of El Aroussa. I drove my motor-cycle combination to some Arab huts and left it with our signallers who had just put up a communications post in one of the adjoining sheds. I strapped the equipment to my back and started to walk, hoping not to be spotted by British positions which were still holding out in some areas. We did not have either the time or the men to mop up what had been until only a day or two earlier, part of the British front line. It was a warm, spring-like day and everything appeared to be peaceful. But it had been like that yesterday, when suddenly all hell had been let loose.

‘This day, however, nothing moved, not even a rabbit. The silence was uncanny. I reached the road from Tally Ho Corner to El Aroussa unmolested. A German parachutist of my battalion appeared from behind a haystack urging me to hurry. By a stroke of luck rather than by good map reading I had come upon the very men who needed the equipment. A bullet had put their set out of action. It was even luckier I had not carried on walking for only 200 yards farther on were several British Churchill tanks. A little to the right lay a farm, later to be known as “Steamroller Farm”, from where I saw the opening shots of the battle known by that name.

‘With my mission completed I returned to the motor cycle as fast as my legs would carry me. When I eventually arrived at the Arab huts and my machine, I was confronted by another problem. A number of German wounded were asking for a lift. One man had had his nose shot off, another was shot through the chest, some had less severe injuries. I had only two seats available, one on the pillion, the other in the side-car. I was trying to work out how to carry as many men as possible when someone pointed out that there was a badly wounded British soldier lying helplessly in a ditch. The sector in which he lay was covered by British machine-gun fire, but the gunners probably could not see their own helpless comrade. Certainly no one from their side was trying to rescue the wounded man. He lay some 60 feet



from a wadi which I would be able to reach. But now I was in a dilemma. As a combatant I was not protected by the Red Cross. The man in need was an enemy. Should I ignore him or should I risk my own life to help the wounded enemy? It was a great risk, not made any easier because I had to cross a short stretch which was mined, but that route would be out of sight of the British machine-gunners.

'I took the risk for an enemy just as I would have done for any of my own comrades. It was expected from us to do such a thing. I crossed the mined strip and followed the path of a wadi until I could hear a faint moan. Looking over the edge of the wadi I saw the man. I leaped from the protection of the wadi and sprinted towards him drawing fire from the British machine-gunner. A bullet hit me in the right foot. I got the man up and pulled him into the wadi because he was too heavy to lift. Fortunately, the British machine-gunner realized what I was doing and stopped firing. In the wadi I put the man into a sitting position and gently shook him. After a little while he seemed to recover sufficiently to become sensible. He had been shot through the chest and may well have been out there for the past 24 hours. I asked him to put his arm around my shoulder and we started walking. He had great difficulty in moving his legs but his grip around my shoulders was very tight. We crossed the minefield safely and I put him in the side-car. I took him and six others to the First Aid Post. On a stretch of the main road I came once more under fire.

'At the aid post I asked for permission to pick up more wounded. My request was granted and a VW was made available to join me. The surprised lieutenant behind the steering wheel was temporarily put under my command (I was a lance-corporal) and we were able to bring back all the wounded who were still waiting for transport. Before leaving for that trip I looked at the rescued enemy soldier. He was a member of the London Irish Rifles. Our MO, Dr Scheiffele, ordered his immediate transfer to Tunis and was confident that the man would survive his ordeal. Then, and only then, did the MO attend to my injuries, which fortunately were not serious.

'Of course, as my action had been observed by a great number of men, a recommendation for an award was made. Shortly after that action we were withdrawn from the front. On 16th March, 1943, in front of the assembled battalion, Hauptmann Hans Jungwirt decorated me with the Iron Cross, Second Class. The first officer who came forward to congratulate me was Dr Scheiffele, the surgeon.'

## STAR OF AFRICA, A SUPREME FIGHTER ACE

It had been my hope that the memories of the war in Africa would include one of the Luftwaffe ace who was nick-named the 'Star of Africa'. Hauptmann Hans-Joachim Marseille was the most successful Luftwaffe

fighter pilot in the North Africa theatre of operation and after his death journal articles were produced by the Propaganda Ministry describing the air battles of 1 September 1942, during which he shot down seventeen Allied aircraft.

It is one of the accepted facts of war that enemy claims are dismissed as crude propaganda exaggerations. That the enemy does not accept tested and proven figures is bad enough, but it is worse when one's own side expresses doubts. There were many examples of this disbelief on the German side during the war, one of which concerns the claims made by Marseille for his victories of that single day's battle. Not only had he made what seemed to be an extravagant claim, but his own squadron had not lost a single aircraft in the fighting. It all seemed so improbable. The need to double check his claims led to the figure for the day being one less than he had stated. The missing 'kill' could not, at first, be accredited for 1 September, but was adjusted later.

The squadron war diary shows that Marseille took-off on three separate occasions, the first at 0700 hrs when the squadron task was to escort a group of Stukas carrying out a bombing raid on Imayid. By 0730 hrs Marseille's unit had picked up the dive-bombers and the whole group flew towards the target area. One account put out by the Propaganda Ministry begins with an account of this particular engagement:

'On approaching the target at an altitude of 3,500 metres the group commander reported ten enemy fighters approaching. At first these were seen only as little points of light but as the two groups of machines closed the Curtiss aircraft became more distinct. When only a couple of kilometres separated them the Stukas made ready to meet the assault. The German pilots saw Marseille's machine make a tight curve and heard his cry "I am attacking!" As he opened fire the group of Curtiss's turned away and his fire hit the last aircraft.

'Marseille's victim seemed suddenly to halt in midair, then shuddered and fell like a stone to crash in a violent explosion. The time was 0820 hrs. Before the first victim had hit the ground Marseille had left banked and had attacked the next machine. This, too, fell burning and struck the ground some 2 kms from the first "kill". It was now 0830 hrs. The Stukas bombed the target and headed for home. A Curtiss dived out of the sky to intercept them but was spotted by Marseille who with his usual accuracy, shot down the gallant intruder. The time was now 0833 hrs.

'As the squadron flew back to base the cry "Spitfires!" was raised. Marseille and his wing man turned to meet the six enemy aircraft which were swooping down upon them. The young commander flew level towards the Spitfire group. He had already selected the enemy at whom he intended to fire but it was still too far away for accurate shooting. Marseille could see clearly the muzzles of the cannon and machine-guns pointing at him but

knew that for as long as he could see these clearly he was safe. Then flames and light smoke obscured the enemy's guns. The Spitfire pilot had opened up at 150 metres. At the last moment Marseille swung his aircraft into a left climbing curve so that he was above the enemy machine. He knew that the turning radius of his own aircraft was smaller than that of the enemy's and he was soon on his victim's tail and only 80 metres behind the Spitfire. He opened fire and saw a plume of black smoke pour out of the fuselage of the stricken aircraft. Just before 0839 hrs, at a spot east-south-east of Imayid, it crashed in flames.

'Marseille's squadron touched-down at 0914, to be refuelled and re-armed. The armament artificers found that as usual the commander's marksmanship had been so good that for each victim he had used only 20 rounds of cannon shell and 60 rounds of machine-gun ammunition. Two hours later the "Star of Africa" was airborne again, his squadron acting once again as escort to a Stuka unit which was en route to bomb Alam Halfa. Some way short of the rendezvous point Marseille saw two groups of British bombers heading towards the German lines and noticed that each bomber group was escorted by between twenty-five to thirty aircraft. Suddenly, a group of eight British fighters broke away from the main body to attack the Stukas. As Marseille turned to meet them the Allied machines formed a defensive circle. This tactic might have worked against an ordinary pilot but not against one so experienced in aerial combat. Flying straight and level towards the circle of Curtiss fighters he opened fire at 50 metres. One machine fell and half a minute later a second followed it. The British commander lost his nerve and his fighter group began to retreat. Marseille pursued them, came to within 100 metres and inside two minutes had gained a third victory. The remaining Allied fighters then closed up and headed first eastwards before turning north seeking to escape over the sea. It was in vain. A fourth victim was gained and two minutes later, at 1101 the fifth kill was registered. The sixth fell at 1102 when Marseille shot down the fighter that was on his wing man's tail.

The battle had now drifted eastwards and Marseille, seeing another group of Curtiss machines heading east, climbed to intercept them. From their open formation it was clear that none of the Allied pilots had seen the German planes. Marseille took the enemy squadron in flank and in a short burst of fire blew the tail off his next victim. Now, with fuel running low, the young commander headed for home but then saw below him another enemy aircraft heading eastwards. He dived to the attack and saw the wings and tail planes of the enemy machine fly off under the impact of his bullets. Eight enemy aircraft had now fallen to his guns; the equivalent of a whole squadron destroyed in ten minutes. When his own group touched-down Field Marshal Kesselring was there to greet them. He had arrived at the airfield on a tour of inspection and had delayed his departure until the aircraft

had returned. In regulation manner Marseille reported the return of his squadron and the day's total of twelve victories. "And how many are yours?" asked Kesselring. "Twelve, Herr Feldmarschall." The Supreme Commander sat down wordlessly.

'The next take-off was at 1358 hrs but a burst tyre prevented Marseille flying that mission so that it was not until 1700 hrs that he was back in the air for a third time that day. Once again the task was to escort a group of Ju 88s undertaking a bombing raid on Imayid. What then occurred was a repetition of the morning's fighting. Fifteen Curtiss P 46s attempted to attack the Ju 88s. Marseille's squadron split the enemy formation. The battle lasted less than six minutes and in a series of combats at altitudes between 100 and 1,500 metres five more aircraft fell to the guns of Marseille's fighter. The first four went down at intervals between 1745 and 1750 hrs. The fifth three minutes later, at 1753.'

Marseille was credited with only 16 'kills' that day because OKW could not confirm the location of the seventeenth victim until the following afternoon.

## ATTACK THE GIBRALTAR CONVOY

The role of the Kriegsmarine in the African campaign was restricted, chiefly because of the Italian Navy's larger presence in the Mediterranean. With the exception of motor torpedo-boats and a few other light craft the German Navy's chief activity was in submarine operations. These reached their climax during the Allied landings along the North African coast during November 1942.

The Kriegsmarine units in the Mediterranean had been ordered into action by a telegram from Hitler, dated 6 November, which read: 'The fate of the army in Africa depends upon the destruction of the Gibraltar convoy. I anticipate a relentless and victorious operation.' All available U-boats in the Mediterranean and operating off the west coast of Africa were ordered to attack the convoys carrying Allied troops. Although the U-boats were able to sink a number of warships their own losses were high and a great many were sunk. The Naval war diary records the operation of *U 515* commanded by Oberleutnant zur See Werner Henke:

'12th November 1942. 1915hrs. Cruising on the surface. Cruiser squadron in sight. Two cruisers, one each of *Birmingham* and *Frobisher* class together with three K class destroyers; heading east. Speed 15 knots. I follow on the surface for a further five hours and am attacked by destroyers on several occasions. At 0015 hrs. we close in and attack the rear cruiser, the *Birmingham* one. From a salvo of four torpedoes two run on the surface or in circles. After running for 70 seconds one torpedo strikes the cruiser

midships in the engine room. The ship stops. Three destroyers patrol the area. The other cruiser heads eastwards at great speed. Within an hour I have penetrated the [destroyer] screen. At 0128 hrs and again at 0148 hrs we fire another salvo. The first hit is in the aft of the ship. The cruiser turns on to her starboard side. I aim at a destroyer of the K class at 0201 hrs and hit her in the rear. There is a massive detonation . . . At 0206 hrs I gain more hits on the cruiser but the ship still does not go down . . . Hunted by destroyers firing star shells. The ship's rudder is malfunctioning and we have a small electrical fire . . . Forced to submerge and attacked with depth-charges at depths between 120 and 160 metres. Reload.

'Surface at 0430 hrs. Move up to where the cruiser, lying on her side, is being towed by a destroyer . . . Fired on by the guns of a patrolling destroyer and from the forward turret of the cruiser. Alarm given. Crash dive, a great many depth-charges and sounds of Asdic. Surface again at 0630 hrs and move towards the cruiser. Fired at by destroyers. At 0650 hrs a double shot from Nos 1 and 2 tubes . . . One hit heard. Submerge again. Depth-charged again . . . Next day heard hundreds of depth-charges and observed aircraft through the periscope . . .'

It was not, however, a cruiser which Henke's U-boat had attacked, but a depot ship, the *Hecla*, and he had also damaged the destroyer *Marne*. Neither was a total loss. In fact, the efforts of the Kriegsmarine to destroy the Allied convoys can be assessed as having failed, although some sinkings were achieved.

# Defeat Looms, 1944

## ITALY INVADED: GERMAN RESISTANCE IN THE LIRI VALLEY

In May 1943, when the war in Africa ended, the island of Sicily was seen by the Western Allies as the stepping-stone to the mainland. The Axis powers, too, saw Sicily as the gateway to Europe and were determined to hold it against Anglo-American attack. They failed in that endeavour and when the campaign was brought to a close after only a month's fighting, both sides knew that an invasion of Italy proper was only a matter of time.

On 8 September, the government of Marshal Badoglio, which had succeeded the fallen Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, surrendered to the Allies. The dismay this caused in Germany was reflected in the survey of public opinion carried out by the SD (Security Service). 'Reports from all parts of the Reich confirm the first impression which the Führer's speech and German action in Italy has produced. The peoples' self-confidence . . . has returned. Confidence in the Führer has reached new heights. Statements by the Führer . . . that what has occurred in Italy is impossible in Germany because he can depend upon his Marshals, Admirals and Generals were received with pride . . . German successes announced so far make it appear . . . that no more unpleasant surprises are to be expected from Italy's treachery . . . In conclusion the reports show that morale has been greatly raised by the successes in Italy and by the Führer's speech.'

A succession of assault landings in the heel of Italy and then at Salerno brought the Allied Fifth and Eighth armies on to the shores of Italy whence they began to fight their way up the peninsula against the grain of the country. Skilful German rearguards occupying mountain peaks and contesting river crossings slowed still further the pace of the Allied advance. At several places south of Rome this was stopped completely, albeit temporarily. One of those places was the town of Cassino above which stood the Benedictine abbey. Fearful for the safety of that ancient shrine the Pope, according to an Italian news agency report dated 9 December 1943, ' . . . obtained an assurance from the warring powers that the hill [on which the Abbey stands] will not be fortified, nor will it be bombed from the air . . . ' General von Senger und Etterlin, the officer charged with the defence of the Cassino sector, wrote in his autobiography, ' . . . I had agreed not to fortify

the monastery. No one would like to be held responsible for the destruction of such a cultural monument for the sake of tactical advantage . . . [In any case] all German tactical views were that so conspicuous a point is quite unsuitable for an observation post.'

The Allies thought otherwise and the abbey was first bombed from the air and then shattered by gun fire. In the ruins of the town of Cassino both sides lived a sort of troglodyte existence while on the bare slopes of the mountain the soldiers were exposed to all the elements and suffered accordingly. Any thrust by Freyburg's New Zealand Corps, which had replaced the Americans, was met by a German counter-attack. This episode in the fighting on those open slopes was written by a Fallschirmjaeger, Obergefreiter Valentin.

'Our No 3 Company was at first held as the counter-attack Reserve on the rear slopes of Colle San Angelo with No 4 Para Regiment. At the opening of the second battle of Cassino we were placed under the command of Boehmler's battalion and during the night of 18/19 March were told off to spearhead the assault upon Rocca Janula. The track running up to that place was by way of two hairpin bends. No 1 Platoon was to seize those while No 2 Platoon was to infiltrate and to pass through the Gurkhas on Hangman's Hill.

'During the night we reached the forward positions held by our own men. Our Company commander was overjoyed when a whole platoon of us arrived. Our comrades holding the front-line trenches were at the end of their tether and completely exhausted, but our arrival revived their flagging spirits. The commander put us in the picture and then we went into the attack. After a few unsuccessful attempts we seized first the upper and then the lower hairpin bend. The British defended themselves with great tenacity and it was only after we had flung down some large explosive charges upon them and had caused a great deal of confusion that they began to pull back. The area around Rocca Janula was in our hands. Years later, after the war, I learned that on that day and at that hour we had been in battle with the Essex Regiment of 4th Indian Division which had been moving forward towards Hangman's Hill. Less than fifty men of that regiment reached the Gurkhas on Hangman's Hill - too few to carry out the planned attack upon the Abbey.'

Even in the bitterness of the fighting more civilized thoughts were not altogether absent. On Easter Sunday the whole area around Cassino lay quiet, peaceful and bathed in sunshine. There was no sound of aircraft, not even that of the little artillery spotter planes, no crashing thunder of an artillery barrage: nothing to break the calm. Then, in the words of the Para Pioneer history:

'The wind carried to us the barely audible sound of church bells whose gentle tone reminded us that there was something else in the world other

than battle, war, misery and death in an infinite variety of forms. The sound became louder, proclaiming the message, "Peace on earth". Louder and louder still until the sound filled the whole of the Liri valley. The men in their slit trenches heard it. Easter – the celebration of the Resurrection – the victory of life over death. Nowhere was the sound more appropriate than here on a battlefield of the Second World War.

'General Heidrich in his TAC HQ listened to the sound and when the last notes had died away turned to his aide-de-camp and ordered him to find out who was responsible in the middle of a battle for such a moving Easter greeting. It turned out to be six NCOs of the Para Pioneers who had gone down to the church in the valley and who had climbed on to its shattered tower because the bell ropes were missing. In the belfry they had had to swing the bells by hand . . . The little church in Castrolielo, in which for so long no mass had been said, gave to thousands of soldiers from every corner of the world, who had been embattled for weeks, God's consoling message in the early morning of Easter Sunday, 1944.'

## DEATH AND DEFEAT ON MONTE GEMMANO

The German defence at Cassino and at Anzio was broken at last, but it had won time for a line to be established across the whole width of the Italian peninsula from south of Rimini on the Adriatic to the Tyrrhenian Sea. This was the last main German defensive position in front of the River Po. It was one which Kesselring had to hold and the offensive to break through those defences has passed into military history as the battle of the Gothic Line. According to Wolf Schirmmacher, in an article he wrote for a German soldiers' magazine during September 1944: 'The Adriatic Sea limits the extent of the battlefield on our left flank. To the right there is the steep Monte Titan which rises like a horn above the little republic of San Marino. In between there is the silhouette of Rimini . . . farther to the right lie one behind the other three long ridges. These are the last pieces of high ground before one reaches the green plain extending seemingly endlessly to the west and to the north.' To the north lay Bologna, an objective of Eighth Army's attack and behind Bologna was the River Po. To the British commanders it was clear that once the German defensive crust had been broken and the ridges captured, the armour could race across the plain towards the Po, overrolling the Germans who would have no opportunity to set up new defensive lines.

To prevent Eighth Army from breaking through and reaching the open plain was Kesselring's intention and the three ridges mentioned by Schirmmacher decided the course of the battle. Longstop Hill in Tunisia, more than a year earlier, had demonstrated the simple truths that he who



held the high ground dominated the battlefield and that mountain tops could be held with small garrisons. One of the élite units holding the ground around Monte Gemmano, the most dominant of the three ridges, was 100th Gebirgsjaeger Regiment which had fought in Crete. Helmut Hermann was the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion which held Gemmano against the successive assaults of a British battalion and then an entire brigade. The feature finally fell to a divisional attack. Helmut Hermann wrote:

‘I can give neither exact locations nor timings but it was the middle of September 1944 and we were defending a sector in the area of Montescudo. I was at that time a captain and commanding 1st Battalion of 100th Gebirgsjaeger regiment. It was originally intended that at the beginning of September we would be withdrawn from the eastern Po plain and posted to the high mountains along the French-Italian border where we would have been in our ‘element’. Nothing came of that intention. Instead we were put in hastily in the area of Gemmano to meet the major offensive which the British had launched. We spent a great many days under fire from British artillery, from the fire of ships out at sea and from Allied aircraft as well as holding out against infantry and tank attack. We frequently had to change our positions and suffered quite heavy losses.

‘Now we had reached the edge of a rather open, high ridge which fell abruptly on its western side. Just below its upper crest there was a small cave in which I set up Battalion TAC HQ. Our anti-tank weapons consisted of “Panzerfaust” for close-combat action and the “Stovepipe” [a rocket-launcher with a range of about 300 metres]. Those weapons were useless against the British tanks which kept out of range of our weapons, but which fired at us from great distances. We realized that a few tanks had broken through on our right flank and were rolling towards regimental TAC HQ. One of the armoured fighting vehicles stopped on the road at a place from which it could have fired into our little cave. We could only hope that we had not been seen and did not dare to leave the cave before nightfall. Those were very anxious hours for us. Our nerves were taut and the time passed so slowly. But at least our telephone lines were intact and we were in radio contact with the rest of the regiment.

‘Then came the order to pull back to a new line. Seldom had we longed for nightfall with such intensity. To our relief we were not discovered. Before midnight we had reached the new line and dug in as best we could. En route to the new line I found out that although we were in touch with the units on our left flank, on the right there was a dangerous gap. I took my aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Herber Pohlmann, along a path in order to find our right-flank neighbours. The sky was eerily lit by a great number of ship’s searchlights which, reflecting from the clouds, produced a diffused light. The British artillery had meanwhile gone over to intermittent fire. During our search we saw a large farm in which there was movement. Hoping that this

might be the German unit we were seeking we moved towards a group of men, about a platoon in strength, who were working busily but quietly in the farm courtyard. I was about to approach one man but soon realized that there was something suspicious about the number of soldiers moving about. Then I saw that they were British. It was clear that they had not noticed us. We moved away as quietly as we had approached and found after a further search the lightly held positions of our neighbouring unit. We discussed the situation with them and soon the gap in the line was closed. My aide and I had been walking through No-Man's Land between the enemy's positions and our own.'

## THE WEHRMACHT BROKEN

While 100th Regiment was battling to hold Gemmano, other formations and divisions were being forced back on the lower ground along the Roman road which runs from Rimini to Bologna. One of those units was the 278th Division. Rolf Dittmann, of 993rd Grenadier Regiment, wrote of the sacrifice of the German infantry during the Gothic Line offensive. His words are applicable wherever and whenever the infantry bears the brunt of the fighting:

'Our battalion was in position, during the night of 15th/16th September, on the southern slopes of Montescudo . . . Company strengths were about 20 men. I held the vital sector of the battalion line and was told to expect No 3 Company as reinforcement once the 1st Battalion of 993 Regiment reached our area. At about 1 in the morning I went forward with a runner from the relief regiment. The situation in the front line was chaotic and near Marcagnano, some 600 metres behind the front line, we clashed with an enemy patrol. There was a lot of wild firing because it was difficult to determine friend from foe. That episode cost us two wounded . . . We reached the front line where we were to carry out the relief of the survivors of the three companies holding the line. The relief was a noisy one and as the battle lines were only hand-grenade distance apart the Indians soon realized what was happening and made an attack upon No 1 Platoon. The confusion was indescribable. Corporal Marks was able to hold the Indians on his sector but the rest of the group was driven back to TAC HQ. Using those men and the reserve group we launched a counter-attack although we were unfamiliar with the ground. It was a short but fierce engagement but at last we recovered the trenches which had been lost . . . In that counter-attack an NCO and three men were wounded, some had burns from phosphorus grenades . . . At dawn No 3 Company came up at last but once again the relief was made with too much noise and No 3 Company which had just taken over the high ground was driven off it. It was too dangerous

to leave the enemy in possession of ground which would dominate us and an immediate counter-attack was launched by No 3 Company (18 to 20 men). We gave them covering fire as they went in. That counter-attack seemed to dispirit the enemy who made no more attacks that day . . . I reported to Battalion TAC HQ in Corianino where replacements had come up. I received eight men to replace those who had been lost in the past days' fighting. I also received an officer replacement, a man who left the Company in January as a lance-corporal and has come from OCTU.'

The sacrifice of the German infantry continued beyond the River Po when, in the spring of 1945, a massive offensive by both Fifth and Eighth Armies broke the German forces and sent them reeling back towards the Alps. But before they could reach the shelter of the high mountains secret negotiations brought the war in Italy to an end. On 2 May 1945, the German Army Group in Italy surrendered, the first in the week of surrenders which brought the war in Europe to an end, and the officers and men of that Army Group passed into captivity.

The German Army had borne the brunt of the fighting in the Italian peninsula and the participation of the sister services was at a lower level of intensity. The Luftwaffe could deploy only a few squadrons in that theatre of operations although nuisance raids by Me 110 fighter-bombers were a feature of life throughout the campaign. One severe raid which gave the Luftwaffe a victory was that carried out on 2 December 1943, by machines of K G 76. Shipping in the harbour at Bari was attacked and more than thirty vessels were sunk. The raid was a complete success achieving total surprise. For its part the Kriegsmarine, with no heavy units in the Mediterranean, was forced to rely upon unconventional means to strike at Allied ships. A 'K' flotilla, a flotilla of 'small' units was formed and equipped with the first of those unconventional weapons – a manned, double torpedo. A 'captain' sat in the upper torpedo which had been hollowed out to take him together with the primitive engine and navigational equipment. Suspended underneath the captain was the armed torpedo which he would fire at enemy vessels. The first mission was against Allied shipping in Anzio harbour and was a failure. The Allied ships had sailed before the 'K' men arrived. That raid did, however, show up a serious fault in this type of 'K' craft. The captain could not remove the clear plastic hood fitted over the cockpit in which he sat and death by suffocation often resulted.

The invasion of north-west Europe on 6 June 1944 then shifted the emphasis of the navy's 'K' units to Normandy and Holland, and naval operations in Italy, which had now become a very minor theatre of war, diminished as a consequence.

## DEFENDING THE WESTERN SEABOARD

British plans for an invasion of north-west Europe were laid in 1940, the same year in which the Expeditionary Force had been forced to leave the continent. For certain strategic and political reasons OKW gave no serious thought to the possibility for several years. Then, on 3 November 1943, Adolf Hitler issued Führer Directive No 51. This admitted that the bitter fighting and heavy losses of the past years had had their effect upon the German armed forces and that a new strategy was required. Territorial losses on the Eastern Front, the Directive claimed, would not be disastrous. In the west, however, a successful Allied invasion could bring about the defeat of the Third Reich. The Führer had decided, therefore, to improve the defensive capabilities of the armies in the west. The Directive accepted that the whole area of the western seaboard up to and including Denmark, could not be defended at every point in great strength, but it did order that defences were to be concentrated in the likeliest landing areas.

There were two obvious regions in which an invading force might come ashore: in the Pas-de-Calais or in Normandy. Hitler appreciated that the capture of a major port was vital to the Allied plan of campaign and in the final months before D-Day came more and more to consider that Normandy, with the major ports of Cherbourg and Brest, would be the likelier area. Despite that he still kept an entire army grouped in the Pas-de-Calais region. Having considered where the Allies were likely to land, the next task for OKW was to know the strength of the enemy forces that would fight the campaign. German Intelligence sources deliberately inflated the figure of Allied formations to well over 70, although the actual number which would be eventually, under the command of General Eisenhower, was 37 divisions. Only a small number of these would carry out the initial assault. The greatest number would be brought in after D-Day. Facing the Allied armies were 33 'fixed' divisions in a coast defence role, thirteen mobile infantry divisions, two Fallschirmjaeger divisions and six panzer divisions. There was also an OKW reserve of four panzer/panzergrenadier divisions.

Hitler had ordered, in Directive No 51, that all the divisions in the west were to be fully equipped and up to establishment, but there was a discrepancy between what the Führer ordered and what was possible in practice. Most formations were seriously understrength in men and equipment and their fighting qualities varied. The immobile, 'fixed' divisions, all in the 700 series and made up of middle-aged men, had the task of holding an area near to or on the coast. There they would stay, under fire, until, presumably, they were either relieved or destroyed. But there were in Normandy also the Wehrmacht's élite divisions, Fallschirmjaeger and SS; aggressive and battle-hardened veterans for the most part.

Among the most serious problems facing OKW was that no agreed plan of defence had been worked out. There were differences of opinion in the highest echelons of command in the west on how the invasion should be met. Von Rundstedt, the Supreme Commander West, thought it best to let the landing take place and then, before the Allies could consolidate their hold, to attack and to defeat the newly landed divisions in a setpiece battle. Rommel was for an immediate counter-attack while the Allied units were still on the beaches. The failure of the two senior commanders to agree on the strategy to be followed required that Hitler make a decision. He compromised. Mobile units in OKW reserve were to be under his direct control and only he would determine to whom and at what stage of the battle these would be released.

The Allied forces for the coming campaign were known as 21st Army Group and were commanded by General Montgomery. The order of battle of this formation was US First, Canadian First and British Second Armies. Once Patton's Third Army had landed in France and become operational, it and US First Army would combine to form 12th Army Group under Omar Bradley. The Allies landed in the early hours of 6 June and it was against the Anglo-Canadian armies that the bulk of the German panzer divisions were eventually deployed. This was in accord with Montgomery's strategy which foresaw the Anglo-Canadians as forming the hinge on the door – the hinge to which the German armour would be attracted so as to stop the door swinging. This concentration of armour against the British and Canadian beachheads would give the US First Army the chance to break out of its perimeters and swing, in a wide pincer, through Le Mans towards the Seine. Patton's Third Army would strike both into Brittany and also act as a shield along the Loire river to defend the right flank of US First Army. The operations timetable was that by D-Day plus 90, i.e., by the first week of September, the Allied armies should have reached their objectives. They should have reached the Seine and the two great ports of Cherbourg and Brest should have been captured and made operational. A breakout began and an unsuccessful counter-attack by Hitler at Mortain to contain it was responsible for a change in the Allied plan. Patton would not now head for Brittany but would carry out the drive to the Seine in a *Blitzkrieg* operation. As a result of that change of direction Fifth Panzer and Seventh German Armies in Normandy were encircled in a pocket, based on Falaise and during July and August the greatest part of these two major formations were shattered. With their destruction there were insufficient troops to hold the Allies until von Rundstedt, recalled from dismissal, created a loose battle line, chiefly of Fallschirmjaeger units, behind which he established a firm defence. Under Allied pressure and over the course of the next months the German armies in the west were continually pushed back, a German offensive

in the Ardennes notwithstanding; the Rhine was crossed and the war in Europe brought to a close.

In the eleven months from June 1944 to May 1945, the German soldiers, sailors and airmen became only too aware of Allied material superiority. From dawn to dusk Allied aircraft ruled the skies, Allied tank armadas swept across the land, and at sea the only response that the Kriegsmarine could make was in the form of small commando-type operations with manned torpedoes and one-man submarines. The Allied soldiers fought in the knowledge of their superiority in numbers and material. The German soldiers fought using their military skill and with a fear that the unconditional surrender demanded by the Allies would reduce their Fatherland to the status of an agrarian, slave State. Reinhold Hoffmann wrote:

‘As soldiers we were not told what to do if we became prisoners of war, nor how we should behave as prisoners. We were instructed in our responsibility for the weapons, vehicles and equipment which the German nation had entrusted to us soldiers; the weapons bearers of the nation. To be given a weapon with which to defend our country was an honour and a heavy responsibility. Many units made the issue of weapons a ceremony as solemn as the swearing of the oath of allegiance. The inference was, obviously, that if we used our weapons correctly we should not become prisoners – with hindsight a naïve concept but at that time one which carried conviction.’

The German armies which defended Normandy were no longer the magnificent weapon that had entered France in 1940. By 1944, there were a great many units composed of foreigners and non-Europeans. Large numbers of ethnic groups from the Soviet Union had volunteered to fight against Bolshevism and found themselves battling in the west against their country's Allies. Many of these ethnic peoples belonged to the martial races of the Soviet Union, but were unused to the noise and destructive power of modern warfare. Colonel von der Heydte, commanding 6th Fallschirmjaeger Regiment, recalled: ‘Corps [84 Corps] promised me a battalion of Georgians and these, in fact, arrived. They did not stay long, however. They could not withstand air raids. Within three days there was not a Georgian with us.’ This was not the only ethnic desertion with which von der Heydte had had to suffer. Just before D-Day all the Alsatian drivers in his unit had deserted. Germany's allies abandoned her as her defeat became more certain and in some cases her former allies changed sides and took up arms against those who had been, until recent days, their brothers in arms.

In the fierce and destructive battles of 1944, German units suffered heavy casualties and the replacements received were neither sufficient in number nor in training. General Meindl, commanding 2 Para Corps, complained to his superior, Student, that the fighting strength of his units was

dwindling daily. His last two requests for replacements had been ignored and those few men that had been sent soon became casualties because they had had so little training. Many of them, in Meindl's words, ' . . . have never thrown a hand-grenade, fired more than a few rounds with a weapon or have any idea of digging in or of camouflaging their positions . . .' Generally, depleted units were fleshed out, although never completely, with men obtained from disbanded Luftwaffe or naval establishments, thus fulfilling the old slogan, 'A regiment can die ten times over – but it still remains the regiment.' Using all their skill and loyal to their oath the outnumbered remnants of the Wehrmacht fought their way from the bocage country of Normandy, across the polders of the Low Countries, back over the Rhine and into Germany. This was a sacrifice that might not have been demanded of them had more experienced men been directing operations in Normandy. Von Rundstedt's condemnation of Hitler's interference in the strategy of the Western Front, is contained in his conviction, 'If it [the conduct of the Normandy campaign] had been left to me, I would have made the Allies pay a fearful price.' Hitler's meddling extended down to deciding the tactics to be used by sub-units. In his strategic decisions he brooked no contradiction even though these were frequently wrong. He alone controlled the panzer divisions in the OKW reserve, divisions which might have operated against the landings just after these had been made and before the Allied armies had consolidated their hold. But when the Allies landed the Führer was asleep and no one dared wake him. While OKW waited for its Supreme Commander to rise and to make a decision, the Allies poured ashore and established their first perimeters.

The 12th SS 'Hitler Youth' was one of the panzer divisions located in Normandy. It had been raised less than a year earlier but had trained to such effect that by 1 June 1944, that is to say only five days before the Allied landings, the divisional units, with two exceptions, had been classified as 'being in every respect fit for operations'. Those two exceptions were the rocket-projector and the anti-tank battalions, neither of which was up to war establishment in weapons.

## HITLER YOUTH DIVISION IN NORMANDY

His experience of the D-Day landings was described by a subaltern of the 'Hitler Youth' Division, Peter Hansmann, commander of the armoured car company of the divisional reconnaissance battalion. Confused details of Allied paratroop landings needed to be clarified. Supreme Command West ordered 12th SS Panzer Division to ' . . . carry out reconnaissance, to gain touch with 711th Division, to halt and then to guard its area'. The armoured car company was alerted at about 0230 hrs and the drivers, many of them



still in their underwear, rushed to their vehicles. Engines were started and within 15 minutes the Company, ten armoured cars and two groups of motor-cyclists, was ready to march.

‘The Sergeant Major reports the unit ready for action. The men gather round me in a half circle and I brief them, speak of the seriousness of the battle that lies ahead and the object of our mission. As recce troops it is our job to be fast but invisible; to see everything but not to be seen and to report the enemy’s location back to our commanders. I tell them to watch the road surfaces for mines because partisans may have laid mines and go on to detail the order of march. One group of motor cyclists will form the advance guard, followed by an 8-wheel and a 4-wheel vehicle alternately. Distance between vehicles 50 metres. The second group of motor cyclists will form the rearguard.

‘I stand in the turret of the first 8-wheeler and give the order “Panzer marsch!” The night is pleasantly cool and visibility is medium to good – about 50 to 100 metres although the moon is often obscured by cloud or mist. After we have gone a few kilometres I have the feeling that this is just like any of the exercises that we have carried out over the past weeks. The little houses in the villages are unlit. The inhabitants are asleep. There is no sign of the French partisans. Some 15 minutes later and we reach battalion TAC HQ, drive the vehicles under trees in the garden of the château and I report together with my platoon and Section commanders to the CO, Sturmabführer Bremer. We are given the latest information about the landings west of the mouth of the Seine near Carentan, but Bremer tells us that accurate details are lacking. It is, therefore, our task to patrol the coastal sector to the north, between the mouth of the Seine and Bayeux. We are to find out whether enemy troops have landed, where they have reached and their intentions.

‘I divide the unit into four troops . . . We check the radios and set out at about 0400 hrs. My group is made up of two 8-wheel vehicles whose commanders have experience of the Russian front . . . Visibility is improving and is now more than 100 metres. The front we have to reach is about 80 kms away so I choose the most direct road via Broglie and Lisieux to Caen . . . Within an hour we are in Lisieux and here the first civilians are met. The day is beginning for them, a day like any other day . . . We meet motor cyclists and VW cars on the road. On the bridge across the Touques German soldiers, old enough to be our fathers, report that their unit has been placed on alarm, but that apart from bomber squadrons heading westwards nothing has happened . . . I carry on towards Caen . . . We meet more and more military vehicles on the road, so it must still be open. We approach Caen. On its outskirts there is a great deal of movement. Trucks of all sorts are driving about, platoons of soldiers are taking up position. A lieutenant asks whether we have had a brush with the enemy? . . . An alarm sounds and a

report comes in that enemy paras are attacking about 10 km north of the Orne bridges and that heavy fighting is going on. This accounts for the vehicle movement in the streets and explains why the infantry, panzer-grenadiers of 21st Panzer Division, have been turned out. A captain tells me that strong British airborne units have landed on either side of the Orne bridges and that these are probably now in enemy hands. The noise of battle can be heard quite clearly and is probably coming from that area. Fighter-bombers attack indiscriminately. French civilians abandon their homes in a panic and rush out of the town. Back again with my men . . . I send out a patrol with orders to recce to the north. Then I send back my report over the radio . . .

‘On the main road to Bayeux I wish that there was cloud or mist. We are a sitting target. There is a lot of traffic on the road so the Tommies cannot reach there yet . . . We enter the town. Civilians running about. The closer we get to the centre of the town the thicker are the crowds. There are troops and vehicles of all sorts and a single platoon of Feldgendarmarie is trying to sort out the chaos. I try unsuccessfully to reach the Town Major’s office and hear that artillery has been firing on Bayeux . . . From a Feldgendarmarie sergeant I learn that in Arromanches Bay there has been heavy fighting and that the English are landing along the coast from hundreds of ships. If the sounds of fighting are anything to go by it must really be a hell of a battle because the thunder of heavy artillery is very clear . . . That’s it then . . . not only airborne but also seaborne attack. This we must see. I give orders that we are no longer to drive along open roads but under the cover of trees. As we drive up the ridge which lies to the north of the town . . . we look left towards the coast and see fountains of earth and burning buildings. I cannot see the sea at all and drive further forward to gain the crest of the ridge. We park and camouflage the vehicles very carefully under trees and near barns. From the top of the ridge we can see Arromanches Bay . . . What we are seeing is something unimaginable, something totally unbelievable . . . What is that grey mass spread out before us? . . . There to the left is Arromanches. Heavy artillery fire is falling on it. Fountains of earth as tall as houses rise and sink back. To the east there is a seemingly endless grey mass – the sea – endlessly also the horizon but there is, somewhat lighter in colour, something else. I look through binoculars – now I can make out the outlines of individual ships. Close packed and stretching as far as the eye can see, ships, ships, masts and upper works. From the distance I see irregular flashes as the big guns on the ships open up. The sea between the beach and the armada of ships in front of us is dark blue. Across that dark water there are white lines coming from that mass of shipping which extends from Arromanches to the Orne estuary – and they are heading straight toward us.

‘These are fast ships with high, white, foaming bow waves. Landing craft which spew out brown balls of soldiers as they touch down on the beach.

I see white fountains of water rise. Probably our coastal batteries. Then I hear very clearly the sound of a German MG 42. So our coastal defences have not all been rubbed out. Dahmann points out brown figures, struggling through the sand dunes. They are wearing flat helmets – British soldiers. In groups, platoons, and in whole Companies they move slowly, seemingly without meeting any resistance. They are about 3,000 metres away still and can only be seen through binoculars . . . Then I notice tanks, one, two, three – a whole group of them . . . they come from the Bay, drive along the coast road towards us and then turn eastwards. They make zigzag movements – obviously rubbing out nests of resistance. Then I notice that the tanks are carrying large spoons which they push in front of them. Are they going to build a coast road or are they mine-clearing? Other tanks come swimming out of the sea to the shore. Is such a thing possible? At first only the turret is seen but then the whole vehicle emerges like a monster out of the depths of primeval water. And nothing seems to stop them. Don't we have any 88s? They won't be in action anyway, because fighter-bombers are swooping over the area the whole time . . . But now I must report to Division what is happening here. This is the Invasion . . . Soon there will be more ships than water. But who would believe such a thing if he hadn't seen it for himself.

'Right!, get the facts! Where are we? It is 0745 hrs in the Bay of Arromanches, 3 km south of Magny . . . I estimate the number of ships on one small sector of the sea as being 400 plus and that great mass of ships extends across a stretch of sea more than 30 kilometres long. The British are landing troops all the time and seemingly not meeting resistance. Troops with heavy equipment are being debarked. Eleven heavy tanks identified. Our own coastal defence has been wiped out and overrun. Infantry in battalion strength heading south towards Bayeux. Enemy ship artillery bombarding Bayeux and the roads into the town. Fighter-bombers attacking areas of resistance. I am continuing my reconnaissance in the direction of Creully. Over and Out!'

## THE DECIMATION OF 6TH PARA REGIMENT

The occupied countries of western Europe had once been, for the German forces, a sort of rest camp. Units that had been smashed in the fighting on the Eastern Front came to France, Belgium and Holland to be reinforced and to live well before returning eastwards. The Führer Directive changed the pace of occupation life. The Western Front, he had decided, was temporarily, until the defeat of the Allied invasion attempt, more important than the Eastern Front and first-class units were posted to or raised and trained in the peace, plenty and quiet of the occupied countries. The 12th SS Division was one such unit. The 2 Fallschirmjäger Corps was another.

One other para formation which was stationed in Normandy when the Allies landed was 6th Regiment, one of the constituent units of 2 Fallschirmjaeger Division.

Oberst Freiherr von der Heydte had been given and had completed the task of reforming the 6th Para Regiment after it had been almost totally destroyed during the fighting in southern Russia. His regiment, in an independent role, was then posted to Normandy where it was involved in the weeks following the invasion, in fighting bitter defensive battles around Carentan. Colonel von der Heydte wrote of his regiment's actions in Normandy:

'On 23rd July, we lay on the heights to the south of Périers, waiting for the Americans who were striking towards us from St-Saveur le Vicomte. Orders came for us to leave our positions and to withdraw further south because St-Lô had fallen. We were told that the Americans were moving quite quickly from St-Lô towards Coutances and Avranches. This news reached us late by which time part of our baggage train had been overrun. It was clear that we, together with other units in the area of Coutances, were surrounded and more or less cut off. We attempted unsuccessfully to break out of the encirclement by riding on the panzers of the SS units which were trapped with us. Then a wireless message ordered my regiment to move to Cerisy-la-Salle and to prepare that place for defence.

'Aware that the ring would soon tighten around us, I decided to disobey orders and to make an attack to reach the woods which lie to the north of Soules. At that place I would, if there were no other course, set up a defensive position . . . From our positions near Cerisy-la-Salle there was a good view of the main road and one could see columns of American tanks and lorries moving westwards towards Granville. The regiment concentrated during the night of 27/28th July, with orders to reach and to cross the main road. It was unlikely that the Americans knew we were in the area nor could they know our strength. The 2nd Battalion moved rapidly – they could not have been said to have carried out an attack – going via Notre-Dame-de-Cenilly to reach the Soules forest. Regimental headquarters and the other regimental detachments, together with 1st and 3rd Battalions, were to cross the road during the hours of darkness, by passing through the gaps between the American tank units driving along the main road. The area in which the group was to cross lay between Notre-Dame-de-Cenilly and St-Denis-le-Gast. Once across the road the units were to regroup on another road which runs southwards from Hambye Abbey.

'Nearly a whole day passed before the regiment had grouped ready to undertake the crossing. I gave orders that during the hours of darkness my men were to be carried on the vehicles of Panzer Lehr Division which was making its break-out attempt with us, but that as soon as it was light they were to dismount and conceal themselves in woods on the left of the road.

The commander of my 3rd Battalion, Captain Trebes, was killed at this time. He had sought cover, not in the woods but beneath a panzer which was attacked by a low-flying American aircraft. The Regiment reached the cover of the forest of Soulles; the units had gained touch with each other and had met up with other groups of German soldiers . . . I was taken to see General von Kluge who was busy planning a counter-attack [which did not materialize]. Kluge told me that it was now a case of every man for himself. I set up a regimental aid post in Alençon and it was soon filled with the casualties of the past days. By the beginning of August I had only forty soldiers with me. Some others were missing but the greatest number of men of my regiment had been killed or wounded. Two months earlier I had been the proud commander of 4,600 men.'

## ENCIRCLEMENT AND BREAKOUT

Patton's Third Army, which had broken out at the base of the Cotentin Peninsula, found the left flank of Army Group 'B'. The American armour had passed round that flank and had brought about the collapse of the left wing of Army Group 'B'. Soon the US armour was driving along the German southern flank. Meanwhile, Anglo-Canadian forces were striking down from the north towards Falaise. The common objective of the Allied armies was to reach the Seine before the Germans did. If they could accomplish this the greater part of the enemy forces in north-west Europe whom they had already loosely encircled, would have been eliminated. The way would then be open for a swift advance into the Reich. Von Kluge, commanding Army Group 'B', was very aware of the danger of encirclement which faced his troops and issued discreet orders for certain units to move eastwards towards the Seine. These orders had to be discreet because only weeks earlier a bomb had exploded in Hitler's headquarters and many of those implicated in the plot had been army officers. The slightest sign of a lessening of moral fibre among the senior military commanders was taken by the Führer to be treachery and was punished accordingly. Von Kluge's carefully worded instructions directed the slow-moving, vulnerable and numerous horse-drawn formations of Army Group 'B' to move out of the pocket which was forming so that when the time came for the armour to withdraw, the panzers would find the roads clear of traffic. The collapse of the pocket came quicker than was expected and a great mass of formations belonging to Army Group 'B' was caught and destroyed in a battle which lasted from 12 to 21 August. When it ended the whole of the area from the River Orne in the west to Mount Ormel in the east and from Falaise in the north to Argentan in the south, was a cemetery of unburied dead. The stench of decaying bodies could be smelt by the pilots of light observation aircraft flying hundreds of feet

above the stricken area. General Eisenhower described how it was literally possible to walk for hundreds of yards at a time stepping on nothing but decaying flesh.

The War Diary of Fifth Panzer Army, describing the conditions in the last days of the fighting, reported on the evening of 18 August: ' . . . at the [eastern] exit of the bottleneck . . . no movement of any kind is possible due to the continual air attacks by fighters and fighter-bombers. These machines attack even individual soldiers. Nor is it possible to sort out the intermingled units . . . Communications have broken down . . . ' By the next day, although the encirclement was complete, along the eastern side of the pocket there were still a few gaps and some places where Allied forces were not yet in sufficient strength to repel any determined breakout attempts. The flexibility of the German military system produced plans for a mass breakout, even though those plans had to be drawn up under the most difficult conditions. Hubert Meyer was at that time GSO I of 12th SS Panzer Division. He wrote:

'Our divisional headquarters was a farmhouse in the area of la Londe, southwest of Trun. Also quartered there was the TAC HQ of 84 Corps under whose command was the remnant of our division ['Hitler Youth']. Unforgettable and typical of the situation as it was at that time were the conditions under which both headquarters were working. In one room of the farmhouse there was a long table on either side of which were benches without back rests. This room ran the whole length of the house and along one wall was an open chimney. On one side of the table sat Kurt Meyer, the divisional commander [of 12th SS Panzer Division 'Hitler Youth'] and I, his GSO I. On the other side was General Elfeldt, GOC 84 Corps, and his Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-Colonel von Kriegern.

'There were also a few aides-de-camp, runners and drivers, perhaps a dozen in all. We waited throughout the night, alternately dozing off and then waking up, expecting reports to come in that the [breakout] assaults by 3rd Para Division and by the [other] battle groups had been successful. There was almost no wireless communication. The 2 Para Corps attack had set off at 2330 hrs on the 19th, but as no report had been received by 0300 hrs on the 20th and as there were no sounds of firing coming from the direction of St-Lambert, we assumed that their break-through attempt had been successful. The 12th SS was given orders to move quickly, otherwise the hours of darkness would be too few to allow all the troops to escape. General Elfeldt and Lieutenant-Colonel von Kriegern joined our divisional headquarters group and just before dawn we set out on foot to pass through the gap which had been made for us. The few remaining vehicles were left behind.'

The attack by 3rd Para Division to which Hubert Meyer referred, went in at 2230 hrs on the evening of 19 August. To the east of the Argentan-Trun road the leading groups took avoiding action to escape Allied tanks

which were attempting to seal the bottleneck. During a fire-fight the Para divisional commander, Schimpf, was wounded and the Corps commander, General Meindl, assumed command. At 0030 hrs the River Dives was reached and crossed, about a kilometre to the south-east of Magny. The paras then came under fire from other groups of tanks which forced them to move eastwards in an attempt to break out of the Allied ring. By first light they had reached Coudehard at the extreme end of the pocket. Before him Meindl saw a commanding ridge, Mount Ormel, and as he watched a line of twenty enemy tanks drove up those heights. To his right there were two distinctive pieces of high ground: Point 262 on the right and Point 243 on the left. Meindl decided to attack Point 262 from the north even though without panzer support, and in daylight this seemed an impossible task to accomplish.

The Allied troops that occupied the high ground were from the Polish Armoured Division. They lay in that area which the trapped German units must take if they were to escape from the rapidly contracting pocket. On the German side panzer units from 'Das Reich' Division were attacking to create an escape corridor which Meindl and his Paras would then hold open for the trapped German units. The confused and bloody fighting for the high ground was fought with bitterness by the men of both sides; the Germans who had to break the Poles and the Poles who were determined to die rather than to give way.

The pocket meanwhile had become a killing ground in which Allied shell explosions and attacks by low-flying aircraft of the Allied air force killed or wounded without mercy. The German units were close packed in a shrinking area which had only the narrow exit at Mount Ormel. When Allied guns and tanks closed that last gap orders were given for the trapped units to make a major assault in order to break out. General Meindl, the Para Corps commander, wrote a letter to his son in which he described the situation of those days. In the attack the General, his runner and a small group of Jaeger had been cut off from the main body by Allied tanks and had only managed to avoid capture when a pair of 88s roared up, opened fire on the Shermans and drove them off.

'Our Paras and some SS men [who had been taking part in the attack] were astonished to hear us call from the enemy-held area. I nagged at my men for having carried out the attack across a flat and open field. Making our way back to our own lines was not easy as we had to pass through machine-gun fire and artillery barrages. For quite long periods we were forced to run doubled up to make smaller targets of ourselves. The enemy artillery bombarding us from three sides, was the worst thing we had to endure. By making a great detour by about 0930 hrs we had reached a small ditch near the road . . . In the same ditch (200 metres distant from Coudehard) was the Supreme Commander, SS General Hausser.



‘The most difficult part lay ahead; we had to take the commanding heights east of Coudehard [Mount Ormel] on which sat a number of enemy tanks. To begin with I opened an attack upon the high ground about 200 metres ahead of us. I knew the ground. Then I moved northwards so as to bypass the enemy tanks and by evening we had accomplished this. The heat and the thirst were terrible. Luckily, one of the tanks at my TAC HQ was carrying a barrel of cider . . . I took the paras and the SS to the left [to the north] and put them into the attack while the army units were kept on the right [i.e., the south] of the road. Three or four tanks, two SPs, artillery without ammunition and about one and a half battalions of paras were my force to attack the heights. In very open formation the flank attack was carried out through hedges, ditches and clumps of trees. There were many anxious hours before we knew whether the attack had succeeded . . .

‘Two enemy tanks in front of us caught fire. A pair of paras had knocked them out in close-quarter combat. Soon one Allied AFV after another was burning. The paras exploited the situation, stormed the heights and took over thirty prisoners. Only two tanks managed to escape. The enemy also withdrew from the neighbouring heights because he thought himself to be outflanked by another of our para units. Our opponents were Poles, excellent fighters who were supported by very good English artillery. Another miracle was the arrival of a panzer battalion of ‘Das Reich’ Division which attacked from the east into the rear of twenty Polish tanks and destroyed eighteen of them. By capturing the heights we were no longer under observation from the enemy artillery observers and as a result the fury of the barrages died down.

‘By about 1900 hrs we could begin the evacuation of the wounded, including General Schimpf (GOC 3rd Para Division). I was on the high ground with my Fallschirmjaeger and, together with a heavy panzer battalion of the SS, kept open the escape gap which our attack had created. Army units, most of them without officers, streamed towards the gap, keen to get out of the pocket as quickly as possible. I moved my TAC HQ to Coudehard, which I knew would be easier to locate. By about 0030 hrs on 21 August, the SS Panzer Division rearguard reported that they were the last troops; there was no-one behind them. Two panzers were put in as a rearguard. The Poles were only 200 metres distant and because they fired at the slightest sound, I ordered a total blackout and no talking. Reports came in from our reconnaissance patrols, the last one at 0200 hrs. They all reported that movement had ceased. At 0200 I went through Coudehard, which was burning, to see Liebach, commanding 8th Para Regiment and gave him orders to pull in the flank guards on the eastern road. By 0300 hrs were were on the march with a small group leading, all machine-guns and Panzerfaust ready to fire. The whole group marched silently eastwards. At the end of 15 kilometres “Das Reich” Division took over the rearguard task from us and

we loaded our wounded on to lorries. The road was marked by burning vehicles. Luckily, heavy rain then set in and not only deadened all noise but also reduced the watchfulness of the Poles. By the end of the 21st we were pleased – licking our wounds though we were – to have escaped.'

## THE WOUNDED

The accounts of men who were in the breakout from the Falaise pocket read like fiction. One man, wounded in the shoulder, was carried by two of his comrades to a farm house. After food and sleep they woke him so that they could carry on with their march out of the pocket. Weak through loss of blood he could not walk. His comrades found a horse, tied him on with ropes and by evening the trio had reached the divisional concentration area. Another man wrote of how he had been wounded and had jumped from a half-track just before it crashed. Taken on board a small ambulance this too was hit and destroyed. After crossing the River Dives he faced the daunting climb up the ridge of Mount Ormel and while making the effort was fired on by a tank and wounded afresh '... but not in important parts of my body'. Hiding himself in some wheat sheafs he passed into unconsciousness and lay there until he was woken by an American soldier and taken prisoner.

Max Anger, at that time Adjutant of the 1st Artillery Battalion of the 12th SS Division, was in a panzer battle group. His description of the breakout is dramatic.

"Orders to break out of the pocket reached us in the Bois de Feuillet, north of Montabard. We were faced with making the difficult choice of what could be thrown away and what was absolutely necessary; what could be carried and how it would be laden. Hauptsturmführer Hagemeyer told us, "Well, first we'll all have a bath and then put on our best uniforms so that we are well dressed if anything happens." He was joking, of course.

'During the morning of the 20th the columns began their march. Once we had passed out of the cover of the woods of Montabard we fanned out on a wide front and drove over the open flat ground. There was no enemy air activity although we presented a marvellous target. We were in good spirits and in some of our "Wasps" [light SP guns] the men were singing. It was a rare sight to see so many of our armoured fighting vehicles at one time. This was a luxury which normally only the enemy could enjoy. Next to our half-track Olboeter was standing in the turret of his panzer. We crossed the Route Departmental 916 heading for Chambois, but then came to a halt near Tournai. Every type of unit was there, mostly from the army and there was total confusion. I heard the cry, "Let the SS through!" We got through and drove farther east. We were suddenly bombarded from the northern ridge and suffered casualties. Between Chambois and St-Lambert we turned

northwards and crossed the D 13. The enemy fire was unusually good and casualties began to rise. We drove uphill using a path which ran through lightly covered ground. The columns halted again. Hagemeyer jumped out of our half-track and ran about 120 metres to a bend in the path. There he was hit by infantry fire and dropped. We loaded him on to an ammunition carrier. It was also here that I met one of the last battery commanders, Untersturmführer Rudolf Heller from Eger.

'I sent a couple of "Wasps" on both sides of the path and carried out my own observation as we were out of touch with everybody else and therefore had no command structure. I "weaseled" my way uphill through the undergrowth and there met SS General Hausser with another commander. He was the last person I expected to see in this place. It was now about 11 a.m. I had a number of targets to engage in order to keep the enemy's head down. Like a rabbit I sprang, crept and ran back to my vehicle and was under fire the whole time. From my vehicle I could make out the fall of our shells. They were spot on the targets on the ridge to the west of Mont Ormel. I tried to gain touch with our leading units but then we were struck by a direct hit. I had had it. Untersturmführer Korenegger from the 12th Artillery Regiment HQ brought me to a half-track and laid me on the floor. I was, therefore, not able to see any more of what then happened although I could hear bullets and sharpnel hitting the outside of the vehicle. We crossed and recrossed the ground for about half an hour under fire all the time looking for an escape route. Then all at once it was all up with us. Our half-track stopped and a few seconds later all the unwounded were dragged out. Our driver drove the half-track, under Canadian guard, to their main dressing station in Trun. The time would then have been about 1600 hrs.'

Oberst von der Heydte, whose 6th Para Regiment was one of those encircled, was scathing of the SS commanders.

'We [the paras] made attempts to escape from the Falaise pocket via Tinchebray which was being continuously bombarded by American artillery. Certain SS commanders tried to issue stupid orders or advice to the troops who had reached the village and in some cases these SS officers drew pistols to enforce their orders. Nobody took much notice of them. My runner asked me whether he could be spared for ten minutes. He came back promptly carrying a large model of a ship. He had promised to bring his little brother a souvenir from Normandy and had "organized" the ship before it and the toyshop were destroyed by the shelling. Once we had passed Tinchebray we knew that we had escaped from the pocket. We came across so many lightly wounded men of the Regiment that by the time we reached the Paris area our strength had risen to 800 men.'

## FIGHTING THE REARGUARD

The battle of the Falaise pocket was over but somebody had to hold the line while the other units made their rapid retreat. The men of élite units, the Fallschirmjaeger, formed the rearguard whenever one was needed, or spearheaded desperate assaults to hold the enemy back. It was the combat skill of Meindl's men which made them the obvious choice to form the rearguard for Army Group 'B'. The exhausted para formations were put back into the line on 2 September, and held their ground while the motorized elements of Fifth and Seventh Armies pulled back. Meindl was critical of those commanders who placed his men in such situations. 'Panzer and Panzer Grenadier Divisions', he wrote, 'are able to move fast and far. Fallschirmjaeger fighting in a ground role cannot do this and thus they are caught by the advancing enemy. Near Mons on 4 September, the bulk of 3rd Para Division was taken prisoner through just such an incident and only a few of the division escaped captivity.'

The survivors of von der Heydte's regiment did not stay long in Paris. 'We moved to Nancy, the first stage of a march which took my remnant to the aerodrome at Gustrow in Mecklenburg where they were reinforced, rested and regrouped before being posted back to Northern Belgium.' After being alerted for the Arnhem operation, von de Heyde's regiment, now reinforced with extra men, was posted to Bergen op Zoom where a Canadian offensive was anticipated. 'The only opposition which the Canadians had met in recent weeks had been from coastal defence troops whose resistance, apart from a few units, had not been too difficult to overcome. For the Canadians to come up against a reinforced, paratroop regiment was a terrible shock. Their commanders decided upon an immediate attack made on a wide front. This collapsed in the resistance put up by my paratroops, but the Canadians mounted a new attack only three hours later and obviously using fresh troops. This assault, too, was brought to a halt just in front of our forward zone. I then launched a limited counter-attack which took us into the northern areas of two villages, Woondsrecht and Hoogersheide. The Canadians fought, I say this as a German, absolutely splendidly. Their officers, up to the rank of brigadier-general, stood side by side with their men in the front line.

'On 23rd October, I received two telegrams, one of which pleased me as much as the other saddened me. The first informed me that I had been awarded the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross. The second posted me away from my regiment to take over command of the Para Army weapons school where I was to train young officers. My last orders as commander of my regiment were for the units to move into the pill-box defences south of Bergen op Zoom. These had been built by the Dutch before the war. My last Order of the Day to my officers and men repeated the words I had used

when the Regiment was raised at Wahn. 'Even if everything collapses and wave upon wave floods over our people, there will still be one Para of my regiment who, fighting against fate and amid the storm and terror, will hold aloft above the waves a banner on which will be inscribed in fiery characters the legend, "Greater Germany".'

## ALL OR NOTHING: THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE

The combat zone in north-west Europe lay now between two great rivers: the Maas and the Rhine. These were the last barriers along which the German Army in the west could hold the imminent Allied offensive. Hitler's pre-emptive attack in the Ardennes, which has passed into history as the Battle of the Bulge, could not halt the advance of the Western Allies but could only delay it.

Although the senior officers of the attacking armies were critical of Hitler's battle plan, most German soldiers were optimistic and confident of success. This was, they felt, the big chance for the German Army in the west to alter the direction of the war and they were determined to gain the objectives which the Führer had set them. They would reach and capture Antwerp; divide the Allied armies and defeat them individually. One of the units which went into the Battle of the Bulge was 'Das Reich' Division, and the Commander of No 16 (Pioneer) Company described that last Christmas of the war:

'24th December 1944. Christmas Eve. The day dawned foggy and damp. The Regiment is to attack during the coming night in collaboration with 1st Battalion of 2nd Panzer Regiment. Our objectives: Manhay-Grandmenil and a break through westwards to Erezee. Part of the Company was told off for mine-sweeping duties and for reconnaissance patrols while the remainder were at the regiment's disposal [to be used as circumstances dictated]. In the early evening a patrol of Pioneers is to locate crossing places for panzer over the stream to the north-west of Odeigne. Another patrol is to recce towards the road crossing at Belle Haye.

'The weather changed. It was a bright moonlit night. The patrol reached Odeigne leaving the cover of the woods to the west of Belle Haye and then passed across undulating fields and meadows. It was not the nicest way to spend Christmas Eve, moving over open ground and without the protection of white camouflage clothing. The men could be seen as dark spots as they crossed the open ground and were soon under fire . . . An MG group acting as flank protection then went into action and covered by its fire the patrol withdrew bringing back three wounded; one of them serious. The enemy did not pursue. Two of the wounded could not walk and were carried while

the third man, thought to be only lightly wounded, was sent to request stretcher-bearers and medical personnel. The lightly wounded soldier, a 17-year-old, reached my Company HQ and reported in the formal method of his training. In the middle of his report he collapsed. The miserable light in the dug-out had been insufficient to show how badly he had been hurt. The medical orderly told us that our young comrade had two bullets, one through the shoulder another through the upper arm and that a further five had grazed his body . . . How had he been able to march for more than a kilometre and a half through knee-deep snow to make his report?

'The bloody outcome of the recce patrol dampened our Christmas Eve. Our thoughts were with the mine-lifting group taking part with the main body in the attack upon Manhay. When the ration party arrived we found that it had also brought mail from home – bridges to link us with our loved ones. Our Company HQ was situated in the same house as the regimental TAC HQ. There was a piano in a large room and one of our comrades began to play a Christmas carol. There was some half-hearted singing, but we had no Christmas spirit in us – our regiment and the 1st Battalion of the panzer regiment were in action. Reports flowed in and during the night both Manhay and Grandmenil were reported taken. The enemy had offered the most bitter resistance and employed masses of artillery and armour. The Regiment had suffered heavy losses.

'25th December 1944. Christmas Day. The day opened with bright sunshine and strong frost. Sounds of heavy artillery fire came to us from both Manhay and Grandmenil. [The enemy's] fighter-bombers and artillery spotting aircraft clouded the skies without opposition. They swooped down and attacked any vehicle or movement on the roads or on the open fields. Odeigne itself was not attacked, neither by artillery fire nor from the air. Apart from those sections which were in action with the 2nd Battalion in Grandmenil, the remainder of the Company, which was at regimental disposal, did not go into action . . .

'26th December 1944. Second day of Christmas. We marched on foot and reached the TAC HQ of 1st Battalion, 2nd Panzer Regiment at dawn. Signs of heavy fighting and of enemy artillery fire were everywhere. Enemy artillery fire forced us to take cover. At about 0830 hrs we resumed our march to Grandmenil. About halfway there was renewed artillery fire which lasted for about an hour and a half. The road between Manhay and Grandmenil was under fire from both artillery and enemy tanks. We took cover behind a lone house behind which some men of the Regiment were sheltering, together with a few prisoners. Suddenly the enemy's fire stopped. We reached Grandmenil. Above us fighter-bombers were attacking the town. Just as we reached a point some 200 metres south of the place and were about to move into it the enemy barrage opened again. We took cover in the first

house but did not stay there long as the Amis began to fire phosphorus shells and had soon set the house alight.

'During a break in the barrage we left that house and moved into another just up the road. There were a couple of panzers near it. In the house we found some forty badly wounded comrades of our 2nd Battalion. Suddenly there was a massive explosion just outside the house. The heavy ceiling of the cellar where the wounded were being treated was lifted in the air by the blast and came down without breaking up. That must have been a pretty sight for the badly wounded to see. We rushed out of the cellar to find out what had happened. The partially camouflaged panzers which had been standing on the road had been attacked by fighter-bombers. One bomb had fallen between one of the panzers and our house and had exploded leaving a huge crater. The panzer itself showed no signs of damage but the outside of the house had been torn away. The enemy bombardment continued to fall all round us.

'At about 1215 hrs it stopped . . . The Ami infantry then began an attack. There was the sound of battle to the north and to the west of us. The enemy struck with a mainly tank force along the road and to the north of it, aiming for Manhay. There was all hell let loose to the west of Grandmenil, but the enemy's furious attack was halted by our Regiment . . . We leaped over fences and across gardens to get to battalion TAC HQ and as we reached the smithy came under machine-gun fire from the right flank. A single enemy tank had broken through. I was on the road and reached the smithy in one huge leap . . . The tank stood in a garden about 125 metres away from us and the machine-gunner must have seen us for he concentrated his fire on the brick pillar at the smithy's entrance. He seemed to have an endless belt of ammunition. The pillar was about 40cm wide and machine-gun bursts tore whole bricks out. Then the tank's main armament opened up. The [armour-piercing] shots went right through the rear wall. Whenever the gun fired a door opened in the farm house and the heads of two of my comrades could be seen. They waved to me that I should join them. I couldn't do that. I would have walked right into the burst of machine-gun fire. I determined to wait until the enemy machine-gunner changed belts. The next shot from the tank's gun was a high-explosive shell. There was smoke, dust and then shrapnel whirled around. After that shot the machine-gunner stopped firing. I was intact. I raced to reach the farm door but landed instead in the midden. We three rushed round the corner waiting for the Ami tank, but it did not come. That HE round had been its last shot. A corporal from 2nd Battalion had attacked it with a Panzerfaust and had destroyed it.

'We reached 2nd Battalion's TAC HQ and I reported. The CO told me that the battalion was surrounded, that the Amis had attacked and captured Manhay. The battalion was practically out of ammunition and supplies.



Thank God, the Amis did not attack again although artillery fire continued to fall . . . In view of the shortages of ammunition, fuel and rations our attack . . . could not be continued. Severe losses and insufficient medical support forced the regimental commander to break off the attack. We would have to fight our way out of the encirclement. The non-walking wounded would have to be left behind with some medical orderlies. Radios and vehicles were to be destroyed.

'The CO gave the order to break out. A rear guard secured the battalion's withdrawal. In the event, we did not have to fight our way out. In the south there was a gap in the enemy's ring. By midnight the 2nd Battalion and the attached groups of No 16 Company were approaching the enemy lines. In a silent march we filtered through the gap, marched across meadowland, over a small stream and reached at last a large wooded area. In that wood we gained touch with our own troops. At dawn we moved north of Odeigne out of the forest and reported to Regiment . . . The Company was together again. Christmas 1944 was a memory . . . On the 28th the Company moved to a new battle area of Marcouray-Marcourt-Beffe-Trinal where it was grouped and employed as an infantry detachment.'

## RECRIMINATIONS

The failure of the armies in the west to fulfil the Führer's plan to smash the Anglo-American forces, coupled with the destruction of Army Group Centre by the Red Army, left no room for doubt that Germany was going down to defeat and as the war neared its end the neurosis of the Party leaders led to the setting up of courts martial with frightening and summary powers. If the Führer decreed that a town or city was a fortress, any attempt to leave was considered to be desertion in the face of the enemy. Trials of those accused together with the judgements and executions were reported in both the local and national Press to warn readers that the Party was implacable in its pursuit of traitors and faint-hearts. Although the Reichsminister for Justice had only authorized the setting up of these special courts during the spring of 1945, drumhead trials had been sentencing and executing those found guilty of dereliction of duty very much earlier than that. Thus, the Party newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* dated 11 February 1945, reported that Floeter, the mayor of Königsberg, had been condemned to death and hanged for leaving the city without permission.

The power of the flying courts martial was terrifying and did not consider war service, rank or medals. General Schlemm, commanding the German airborne Army along the Rhine, wrote of this. 'I had to think about the defence of the east bank of the Rhine in my sector. My proposal to

withdraw the worn-out units to the east bank and to set my staff to the task of preparing defences there was turned down by those in authority. I was made personally responsible that no soldier who was fit for combat left the west bank. A "hanging Commando" was positioned at each crossing-point with orders to carry out a summary court martial on any offender.

'One highly decorated Fallschirmjaeger battalion commander, who had endured twenty-one days and nights of bitter fighting, brought back the exhausted survivors of his battalion to the east bank. It was only with the greatest difficulty that I was able to rescue him from the clutches of the "hanging Commando".'

## RAISING THE VOLKSSTURM AND WEHRWOLF

In those times of trial and tribulation for the Third Reich every means was taken to increase the number of men on active service. As early as 25 September 1944, Hitler had issued the decree raising the Volkssturm. In its most dramatic form this meant the conscription for military service of those between the ages of 16 and 60, that is to say either old men or boys not yet of an age to be in uniform. The training was sketchy and the arms both few in number and poor in quality. And yet the Party demanded that these children and ancients, defend their hearths and homes with fanaticism. In fact it was often required for the battalions to fight in other towns, other provinces, sometimes other countries. One Austrian battalion was sent to Saxony and having spent a number of weeks in splendid isolation in the deep forests there, decided after a show of hands, to dissolve the unit and to return home. When the German Army pulled back, the Volkssturm men must have had bitter feelings as they watched panzer, heavy guns and well-equipped infantry retreating through their villages and knew that they now had to face the fury of their well-armed enemies. There is the story of one Volkssturm commander who, having seen the last military unit pull out, asked permission to disband his unit and let the men go home. The voice at the other end of the telephone told him that if he did that he would most certainly be shot. Whereupon, the Volkssturm officer with impeccable logic asked who would do this as the army had already withdrawn. The commander at the other end of the telephone line hung up.

With the Western Allies across the Rhine and driving through the heartland of Germany, the situation deteriorated and even more frantic efforts were made by the Reich's leaders to stave off inevitable defeat. The first day of April 1945, was Easter Sunday, and Deutschlandsender, the national radio station, announced the formation of a German resistance movement – Wehrwolf. The words used to proclaim the German partisan movement were hysterical but sinister.

'Hate is our prayer. Revenge is our battle cry. Those towns in the west of our country which have been destroyed by Allied terror raids and the starving women and children along the Rhine have taught us to hate the enemy. The blood and tears of our brutally murdered men, of our despoiled women and of our children beaten to death in the eastern provinces cry out for revenge. Those who are banded together in the Wehrwolf proclaim their determined, irrevocable oath, never to bow to the enemy's will but rather, despite difficulties and with only limited means, to offer resistance, despising bourgeois comfort and to go out, facing death proudly and defiantly to wreak revenge by killing the enemy for any misdeed which he has committed against our people. Every means is justified to strike a blow to damage the enemy.'

'The Wehrwolf has courts which will decide the life and death of our enemies, as well as of those traitors to our own people . . . If the enemy believes that he will have an easy time . . . then he should know that in those areas of Germany which he occupies he will meet an opponent with which he has not reckoned, who is more dangerous because he is not tied by the limitations of bourgeois methods of warfare . . .'

The Wehrwolf call to action seems not to have found favour with all the civil population. A sergeant in a replacement battalion of 12th SS, which was positioned along the River Weser, described the reaction of the civilians to the fact that a battle was about to be fought around their village.

'The British [11th Armoured Division] began their preparations to cross the Weser in our area and I placed men in the fields on the outskirts of the village. From the positions I selected we would have had a marvellous field of fire which would have dominated the embarkation points on the west bank of the river, the crossing and for all the time that the British were building their perimeter on the eastern bank. That was my plan, but almost immediately a group of women came up to find out what our intentions were. When we told them they hurried away and returned with an elderly man who turned out to be the local mayor. He did not have the authority to order us to abandon the village but he and the women suggested that perhaps our positions could be dug a long way behind it, perhaps on the railway embankment, a mile away. It was very clear that the civvies were dead scared of Allied shelling and air raids. The women were the worst and got at my young lads with remarks like, "You have a mother of your own. How would you like her to be in our position?" The CO came up, listened to their argument and ordered us to leave the village and to take up positions on the railway embankment. Although there we had a very good view of the British infantry and Commandos crossing the Weser and taking up position in the flat fields on the eastern bank of the river I know, from experience, that had we stayed in the village we could have destroyed the river crossing attempt in our area.'

In the western area of the Rothaar Mountains the Americans were in action and an unknown civilian wrote of the events of Holy Week.

'On Maundy Thursday the Americans moved nearer to our village and the beaten German army flooded back through it. Hour after hour that tragic procession continued. Horse-drawn cars, smashed guns, shot-up tanks being drawn by tractors and finally the exhausted infantry. The Volkssturm, the last of all male persons between the ages of 16 and 65 who were still in the village, began to erect anti-tank barricades.

'On Easter Sunday the German Army moved into the village in strength and the inhabitants went down into the cellars, fearful that war would soon roll over them. During the night Easter Sunday/Monday the troops were reinforced. There were guns and ammunition lorries in every street . . . At 10 in the evening the guns opened fire . . . On Tuesday the Volkssturm was pulled back from its positions outside the village. German guns were brought into the woods and fields around the village. At 2115 hrs the first shell fell in the village and damaged a house. The shrieking of the shells, fearful explosions and terrible echoes filled the valleys. German guns replied . . . Wednesday the 4th, was a rainy day but from 8.30 am the guns fired non-stop . . . our soldiers tell us that not even during the Rhine crossing was the enemy's barrage so heavy. The German artillery can only fire short barrages as ammunition begins to run low . . . The civilians in the cellars have suffered casualties and some of the houses in the village are alight . . . Then fire from infantry weapons is heard and by the afternoon most of the German guns have been pulled out . . . The fighting grew louder as evening came on and then there was the sound of tank engines. The first Americans come into the houses searching for German soldiers whom they take into captivity. The sound of fighting moves away from the village but then the German artillery begins to fire upon the Americans. The population flees back into the cellars from which they had emerged only a few hours earlier . . . Sunday 8th April . . . This day is the one on which the young people make their first Communion, a sign that life is returning to normal.'

While life may have been returning to normal in certain rural parts of central western Germany, this was not the experience in the east where Soviet forces had entered the eastern provinces of the Fatherland.

## EVACUATION IN THE EAST

The Red Army's summer offensive of 1944, brought about the collapse of Army Group Centre thus setting the stage for a Soviet offensive which would, eventually, thrust into the heart of the Third Reich. In the late autumn of that same year a Red Army offensive struck and split Army Group North. Within weeks of the assault's opening Russian spearheads had reached the

Baltic in the area of Memel while other Red Army formations spread out to encircle and to isolate East Prussia. There was then a temporary lull in operations while the Red Army fronts in the north, which had outrun their supplies, regrouped and reformed, preparing themselves for the next stage of Stavka's operational plan.

This was to be a twofold blow, the first of which, by 2nd and 3rd Belorussian Fronts, was intended to smash the German forces in East Prussia and Poland. The second offensive, to be carried out by 1st Belorussian and 1st Ukrainian Fronts, would drive from the Vistula to the Oder and create a springboard in central Germany from which the final Berlin offensive would be launched. Operations by other Red Army Fronts along the remaining sectors of the Eastern Front were to be subordinate to those blows. Within days of the opening of the first offensive, during the second week of January 1945, it was clear that Army Group North did not have the strength to withstand the assaults of the two Russian Fronts.

As the military units of Army Group North began to crumble fear grew among the civilian population. In most districts evacuation programmes had been worked out but had not been put into operation. Hitler was known to oppose any evacuation and Party officials lower down in the hierarchy were fearful of issuing movement orders lest they be considered lacking in moral fibre and condemned to death. Precedents such as the mayor of Königsberg existed. Conversely there had been cases where senior Nazi leaders had used the 'old boy' network to have themselves and their families appointed to posts in western Germany and had, thereby, abandoned the civilians for whom they were responsible. The most notorious case was that of Erich Koch, the Gauleiter of East Prussia, who had ordered the population not to evacuate. The Red Army, he claimed, would be halted in East Prussia. Most of the civilians under his authority had obeyed him. Others, living close to the Baltic and anxious to avoid the fighting which would soon break over them, began to 'trek', in defiance of his ban, towards ports and harbours from which they hoped to take ship to safety. The main ports to which the refugee columns struggled in the depths of that bitter winter were Königsberg, Pillau, Danzig, Gotenhafen and Hela. They were kept waiting in appalling conditions until Hitler, accepting the advice of Admiral Doenitz, authorized the evacuation of important factories, equipment and vital installations to western Germany. Once that authority had been given, refugees were also permitted to take ship. It was soon clear that a large-scale rescue operation was needed and within days the Kriegsmarine had planned and was evacuating the thousands of refugees arriving in the principal ports as well as in innumerable smaller harbours. It was clear that the Red Navy would show no mercy to refugee ships and the convoys were escorted by a miscellany of light naval craft. Some passenger liners relying upon their high speed sailed without escort and paid the price. At the end of January the

worst sea tragedy in maritime history was suffered when *Wilhelm Gustloff* was sunk by a Russian submarine. How many went down with her will never be known because no embarkation lists were kept, but the number was certainly in excess of 7,000 and was probably nearer 9,000. Not only did the refugee convoys have to run the gauntlet of Russian submarines and dive-bombers but also had to endure the mass bombing of the reception ports by the air forces of the Western powers.

The shuttle service between the evacuation ports in eastern Germany and the reception ports in western Germany began in January and continued until May 1945. When the armistice was signed at Field Marshal Montgomery's headquarters on Lunenburg Heath, the commanders of the German ships anticipated orders to halt the 'taxi service'. Instead, OKM intensified the rescue operation and continued this until 9 May, when the final ceasefire came into effect. Despite the German Navy's heroic efforts, there were too few ships to take off all those crowded along the Baltic coast and waiting to be taken off. At Hela, for example, 60,000 civilians saw the last convoy leave without them, and military units which had hoped to be embarked moved from the quays back to their former positions in the battle line which a determined rearguard had been holding.

The story of that evacuation is almost unrecorded in the West, except for the US Official Naval History of the Second World War which describes it as perhaps the greatest rescue operation in the history of maritime war. Admiral Engelhardt, who was in overall control of the Baltic evacuations, wrote in his report that a '... total of 223 ships out of 366 employed, were lost by enemy action and though no accurate human losses can be given, an estimate of 30,000 lives, i.e., 2 per cent of those taken on board, were lost out of a total of 1,900,000 persons carried ...'

## RED ARMY'S REVENGE

This unknown story of the last weeks of the war in Germany's north-eastern provinces, known to many as 'The East German Passion', is one of misery, terror and degradation as well as heroism and self sacrifice. 'Within days [of the opening of the Red Army offensive on 12 January] there was terror in the land. It was said that Red Army men, encouraged by their officers and commissars, were robbing, raping and murdering civilians who had remained behind in their villages.' The terror to which Paula Hallhauser refers was instigated by a leaflet written by the Communist writer, Ilya Ehrenburg, which read in part, 'Kill! Kill! There is nothing of which the Germans are not guilty – those who are living; those yet to be born. Follow the orders of Comrade Stalin and smash for ever the fascist beast in his lair.' The exhortations of other Soviet writers may have been less inflammatory, but

the end result was the same. The Red Army, in a terrifying wave of destruction, fell upon the luckless civilians of East Prussia who had been told by the Party to stand fast because East Prussia would not be evacuated. Had evacuation been permitted thousands would have been saved from the humiliation of rape and infection by the venereal diseases which were endemic in the Red Army. Among the reasons for not evacuating East Prussia was that the Nazi Party leaders considered the fighting will of the soldiers would be strengthened by the presence of German families.

When rumours spread in West Prussia, Pomerania and Silesia of the horror of what had happened in East Prussia, panic gripped the civilian populations, for it was upon them that the next blows would fall. Without waiting for orders those who could 'trekked' by cart or on foot to reach those ports where they hoped to find a ship and safety. Many 'treks', moving slowly through the deep snow, were overtaken by columns of Russian armoured fighting vehicles and crushed beneath the tank tracks. The reports of rape, indiscriminate murder and senseless destruction in Germany's eastern provinces make sad reading. 'My 15-year-old daughter was raped by ten soldiers. When she tried to escape the Russians caught her, kicked her and dragged her through the snow by her blonde plaits . . . Taken to hospital she died of her wounds. In the bed next to hers lay a 12-year-old girl whose internal organs had been torn open from repeated rapes.'

'We were taken from our trek . . . An officer came along and selected those who were to die . . . We others were ordered back on to our wagons and told to watch. An execution squad of ten soldiers shot the victims as they knelt in the snow begging for their lives.'

'The trek had to keep to main roads as all the side roads were choked with snow. We were a defenceless target and were attacked by Russian fighters and bombers. Our aim was to reach the Frische Nehrung, a narrow stretch of land along which we could reach harbours from where, so we had been told, we could get to Denmark.' Another trek moved along a narrow peninsula of land known as the Haff, with the Baltic on either side. In that bitter winter the sea was frozen over. Once the refugees had reached the end of the Haff they had to cross an open stretch of frozen sea in order to reach the tongue of land along which they would have to pass to gain the port of Danzig. Paula Hallhauser was one of those who made the terrible, mid-winter journey across the frozen ice. The 'treks', packed wheel to wheel on the narrow strip of land, shuffled slowly along and people fought to gain the few extra metres which would take them farther away from the advancing Red Army. 'We could move forward only a few metres at a time. Then there were long halts which seemed to last for hours. We spent one night camped out on the ice between the two tongues of land. This was the most frightening experience. It was clear that in parts the ice was thawing and throughout that long night the ice groaned and creaked. It was frightening because



earlier in the day carts had broken through the ice and had been lost in the freezing water. In some cases the weight of the carts had broken the ice, but often this was done by bombs which were dropped by the Russian aeroplanes. When the planes attacked we had to stay and endure the bombing. We could not move forward and were unwilling to go back. The whole surface of the Haff was covered with dead bodies and the wreckage of carts. Dead people, dead animals and broken open suitcases marked the route of our flight. We shuffled slowly between low walls of dead things. It was a picture that could drive one mad.'

## NAVAL BATTLE GROUP 2 AND ADMIRAL SCHEER

Admiral Doenitz, aware of how important it was for the Kriegsmarine to dominate the Baltic during the rescue operation, created Naval Battle Group 2 and placed it under the command of Admiral Thiele. The battle group was a powerful concentration of capital ships, including *Admiral Scheer*, *Prinz Eugen*, *Lützow* and *Admiral Hipper*, as well as destroyers and other small craft. The Battle Group's firepower was used to break up massive Red Army tank concentrations and to give heavy artillery support to the perimeters which the army still held along the Baltic coast. Herbert Dammert, an Army signals expert, was seconded to the cruiser *Prinz Eugen*. Dammert was one of the finest signalmen in the German services and was needed to maintain the wireless link between ship's guns and the army's forward observation officers on shore. The following are extracts from his diary:

'During the pauses in our bombardment I looked at the coast line through the artillery observer's high-powered periscopes. The beach was black with people who had all fled from the advancing Soviets and who were making their way to us on the little boats which they had found on the beaches. The fire of the *Prinz Eugen*'s guns helped to save the lives of many German people, to save them and at the same time, to stop the enemy . . . While we were anchored in Gotenhafen . . . I was told to report to my officer who ordered me to change ships and to sail with the *Lützow*. That ship was en route to the area from which the *Eugen* had just returned. She had been firing barrages from 2nd to 8th February . . . From the *Lützow* I was then transferred to *Admiral Scheer* which was en route to the Frisches Haff where the East German refugees were hoping to reach the ships which would carry them to safety.'

On 26 February, the Red Army launched a new, major offensive. The objective of this operation was Pomerania and once again, to cover the rear of the German Army which was being forced back towards the port of Wollin, the Naval Battle Group went into action. On board *Admiral Scheer* was a naval cadet, Edgar Parady, who kept a log of the ship's final missions.

'18 to 22 January. We are lying at Pillau and are at 3 hours' readiness to move. The hospital ship *Berlin* has taken on board a number of wounded. The *Robert Ley* has also taken on board wounded and refugees . . . Hospital trains (they are really cattle trucks) arrive in the port. The wounded are lying on straw. The crew of the *Scheer* helps the wounded. In the icy cold we go from truck to truck dishing out soup to those waiting to be taken on board. The doors of some trucks have to be forced open. Inside them there is no sign of life. The wounded have all frozen to death. Women and children are now being allowed to board the ships with the wounded. Pillau is to be evacuated. Two more trainloads of wounded arrive. We help to carry them into the hospital ship. The scenes which I saw are indescribable. On the stairways and in the gangways stretcher-cases as well as women and children lie or sit huddled together. The ship is overfilled, but still more women and children pour on to her hoping to escape to the west. The enemy is at the gates of the city.

'25 Jan. The light cruiser *Emden* is anchored ahead of us. Midships there is the sarcophagus which holds the mortal remains of Field Marshal von Hindenburg, the saviour of East Prussia in the First World War. His estate in West Prussia, Neudeck, is already in enemy hands. The Tannenberg memorial, built in 1927, which had been von Hindenburg's final resting-place, had been blown up.

'26 Jan. . . . wounded continue to crowd aboard the hospital ship *Berlin*. All quays and piers in the harbour are prepared for demolition.

'27 Jan. Refugees, wounded and displaced people fill the piers. The streets of Pillau are jammed. Everywhere there is a sense of fear. The sound of gunfire is coming closer. The crew of the cruiser mounts day and night patrols of 20 men and an officer to keep order in the town . . . More train loads of wounded come in. The crew of the cruisers is given instruction in firing Panzerfaust launchers . . . We are trying to control the flood of people seeking to board the ship. Often the stretchers carrying someone on board are turned back and the men are laid instead in the snow. The young woman doctor standing by the ship's railing closes their eyes for these who are taken ashore are the dead whose places can now be taken by a living person.

'3 February. During the night we have loaded more 28cm ammunition for our heavy guns . . . At 0400 hrs we set out for the Frische Nehrung.'

From 4 February until 5 March, *Scheer* supported German ground forces in the Pillau and Königsberg sectors as well as at other ports in the eastern Baltic. On 6 March she took on board 800 refugees and 200 wounded and reached Swinemunde on the 8th. 'All around are ships which have been sunk or which have run aground; the victims of mines or torpedoes. Ghostlike their masts and upper works stand out of the water. I have identified one of the vessels as being the hospital ship *Berlin*.'

Once again *Scheer* sailed out into action in the eastern Baltic and upon her return to Kiel the cadets in the crew were posted away from the ship. 'We paraded on the pier when she steamed out again and in a farewell salute gave three cheers for our ship.' Pardy was then put into an infantry unit to defend the Danish island of Seeland. *Scheer*, from which he and the other cadets had been posted, was attacked by the RAF during the night of 9 April, and capsized.

## BATTLES IN THE BURGENLAND, AUSTRIA

The preceding section traced the fighting in the northern sector of the line and it began with the words that the Red Army's summer offensive had brought about the collapse of Army Group Centre. One consequence of that disaster to German arms was that the battle line in the east consisted of major groupings in the north and south with only weak and unconnected formations holding the centre. This disastrous situation could not be repaired and continued throughout the last months of 1944 and until the end of the war. The Red Army was thus able to switch its forces in support of new offensives on either wing and, thereby, to destroy the German Army Groups in detail.

In the southern sector the situation was that, following the invasion of eastern Hungary during the first weeks of December, the Red Army had gone over to a major offensive by the 20th of that month. Budapest, the Hungarian capital, was besieged and fell after fifty-one days, and of the massive German/Hungarian garrison only 785 men reached the west. Hitler had, of course, launched attempts to raise the siege but these had failed despite the best efforts of Army Group South. Hitler then announced that without Hungarian oil the war was lost and ordered an offensive to regain the oilfields. This operation, in which three German armies took part, was mounted across low-lying, marshy ground in which the panzer formations could not operate. The offensive had little chance of success and after gaining some ground in the first days of March 1945, met increasing opposition from Soviet formations which had been rushed up to counter it. By the morning of 20 March, the strength of the Red Army in western Hungary had grown to a point where it could launch a general offensive whose repeated and heavy blows shattered the German formations. One of the divisions involved in the fighting was 12th SS Panzer Division 'Hitler Youth'. The savage battles of the previous weeks had so eroded its strength that some of its major formations had been reduced to battle groups. These fought on against Russian numerical and material superiority, but when Soviet advances forced divisional headquarters to flee into the deep woods around Oedenburg, there

was no longer firm central control over its formations and these fought on almost in isolation.

Continual losses and no replacements weakened the 'Hitler Youth' and by the first day of April 1945, the 12th SS Panzer Division had been reduced to little more than a large battle group, with a strength of two battalions. One of the actions which reduced the strength of the division was a counter-attack mounted by 1st Battalion of 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment on 31 March. That battle was typical of those in which the other divisional remnants were involved, and Martin Glade described the fighting in the heavily wooded eastern province of Austria, Burgenland.

'We [i.e., the battalion] left the protection of a little wood, some 300 metres from the village [Drassberg]. We moved quietly with our hearts beating fast. The first houses of the villages loomed up out of the dark. Only another 20 paces before we reached the first house. Suddenly the cry "Stoi!". Untersturmführer Degenhardt raised his pistol and fired. The red signal flares exploded in the sky. The Company split, some moved to the left – others to the right. We raced into the village. Bullets were flying about. Shouts. At a racing pace we charge through the village. Resistance is quickly broken. The Red Army men are taken completely by surprise – they break and run.

'By the time it was fully light the village had been cleared of the enemy. The villagers bring us hot coffee, sandwiches and coloured Easter eggs. We are suddenly aware that tomorrow is Easter Sunday. We rest in the village and take some boxes of German Army ammunition from a captured panje cart. The ammunition fits our carbines and assault rifles so the boxes are quickly emptied. At about midday we learn that the enemy has broken through in the direction of Vienna. Orders to leave the village find us, therefore, not entirely unprepared. Two comrades and I are ordered by Untersturmführer Degenhardt to cover the Company's withdrawal to the cover of a little wood. We set up our MG 42 in a ditch in front of the last house. The Russians have noticed that we are pulling out. A few groups of them start to move towards the village. At a range of about 250 metres we open fire. The Russians take cover. Some 50 metres to the left of us there is a haystack which suddenly catches fire. By the time that the advancing Russians are within 150 metres we have run out of ammunition. The village behind us is empty. There is not a soul to be seen. We pull back a short distance and take cover near a house. The Russians are suspicious of the quietness and do not pursue us. We are lucky and leave the village from the other side and reach the wood, which lies about 1,300 metres away, without trouble.

'Our comrades are in a clearing waiting for us. We [the battalion] have been cut off and set out to gain touch with our own troops. The Companies march out, correctly disposed, No 1 Company now in the rear of the battalion

column. We move deeper into the woods so as to avoid the Russians. After a few hours we come across a road on which seemingly endless columns of Russian vehicles are moving; tanks, panje carts and infantry mounted in lorries. We stay under cover in bushes some 50 metres off the road and wait there for a break in the traffic so that we can rush across the road. Time passes. How long have we been here? We have no idea. At last there is a break. We reach the road and hear the sound of motor engines coming from the right flank. The wood swallows us up again. We move off quickly, then come to the end of the tree line. A little path takes us through another stretch of woodland and towards another road. This should be easier to cross as there is no traffic using it. About 100 metres away on the far side of the road there is more woodland. We wait. Evening comes. The leading files stand up, emerge from cover and cross the road. We, the rearguard, move forward and the leading files are practically on the road when from the right two cars come speeding along. We throw ourselves flat. A voice says "Don't fire! Let them through."

'One of the men loses his nerve and opens fire. The cars halt and try to turn round. We all know that the Russians must not be allowed to escape. What then happens is over so quickly. The cars are stopped by our fire. Nothing moves. We cross the road. Near the cars there are three dead Russian officers and two dead Russian women soldiers in uniform. We rest in the woods and then continue the march, across fields, woods and a rather wide stream into which some of the men fall. Villages, brilliantly lit up, are on either side of us. At about midnight we find ourselves in some deep woods. By moonlight we can see a road in front of us shimmering in the moonlight. Carefully we move forward. Suddenly a twig cracks and immediately there is a shout "Stoi! Stoi!"

'We stand like statues. It is dead quiet. Then the Hauptsturmführer gives the order, "Give a cheer lads and then charge across the road." His seems to be the only voice to shout hurray, but then others take up the cry and then we all start to move. What follows is a matter of a few seconds only. We reach the road. There are shots. In the shadow of the trees along the road there are lorries, motor cars, tracked and half-track vehicles. There is also a Stalin Organ [a multi-barrelled mortar]. The Red Army men who have been lying near their vehicles sound asleep are rudely awakened and reach for their weapons. We open fire on them, cross the road and dive into cover. The road is an absolute hell. The Russians are shouting, engines are started up, shots are fired. We leave them to it and move deeper into the trees. There we regroup and can see how few we are now in number. The Russians do not seem to be following us. We reach a deep hollow surrounded by trees and there we intend to spend the day. Dawn is breaking. We are able to rest for only a few hours. Towards midday we hear the Russians shouting to each other as they comb the woods. We lie still with our weapons ready. As the

first shots ring out some of us turn and run. The Hauptsturmführer and Untersturmführer Degenhardt who are with our group order us to move quickly otherwise we shall be caught. As we do so I am wounded.

"The Russians are shouting behind us, "German soldier stand still!" but we ignore them. The enemy follows us at a leisurely pace. We reach the end of the woods. About 150 metres away there is a field and a strip of thick shrubbery. We race towards it, disappear into it, take up firing positions and wait. The first Russians appear at the edge of the woods, still shouting and firing. They see where we lie waiting to fight our last battle. But they turn away and do not come back. We can hear them for some time shouting in the woods but at last there is silence. We lie there for the rest of the day. The sun is pleasantly warm. We doze, and some of us sleep. We begin to realize how hungry we are.

"We move out at last light across fields and meadows. How long we marched I do not know. Then in front of us is a brilliantly lit town. Someone says "That must be Eisenstadt" [in Burgenland]. There is another road. How many is that that we have crossed. On the other side is an anti-tank ditch. We spend time looking for a crossing-place and then suddenly a lorry comes along with headlights blazing. We have no choice but to fling ourselves into the ditch. We find a place where we can climb out easily. The Hauptsturmführer tells us before we climb out "We'll shake off the Russians tonight. We shall move into the lake." Between Rust and Oggau the ground is spongy and eventually we are wading through knee-deep water. We move deeper into the lake and are soon up to our waists and then our chests. We are crossing the Neusiedler Lake. A rotten night lies ahead of us. The water is icy cold. There is a full moon in a cloudless sky and not a breath of wind. Sound carries a long way in such conditions. Very lights are fired in our direction. The Russians know where we are. We are so exhausted that we can feel nothing any more except hunger and thirst – thirst particularly, although none of us wants to drink the muddy water of the lake which stinks of rotting vegetation. All the time Very lights are fired towards us, but at last the moon begins to go down. In the east a new day is dawning. Daylight will force us to get out of the water and when at last we reach dry land we collapse on to it. We have marched most of the night through the lake and are at the end of our powers. As it gets lighter we find we are in a little vineyard.

"Our rest there is brief for suddenly there are shouts in Russian. These are coming from the direction of Purbach and from Breitenbrunn. They have cut us off. None of us wants to go back into the water so we shall have to infiltrate through the oncoming Russians. We reach a road. In front of us there is a high cliff. For men in our condition it is an impossible task to climb it. Our group – we are down to thirteen men now – run to the right. Some men seem undecided. Perhaps they no longer have the strength to

move and just stand there. Another group breaks away to the left. Machine-pistols open fire. There are screams. We charge at the Russians, firing all the time, find a place where we can climb the cliff and move up it shouting to the others to follow us. But in vain. We run along the cliff edge waving to them, but they can do no more and drop into ditches or among the growing vines. The Russians close in and wipe them out. Some of us have run out of ammunition. I have only three rounds left. We move back into the cover of the bushes, discuss what we should do and then realize that there is no more noise coming from the road. I crawl to the edge of the cliff. On the road our comrades are lying dead and the Russians are emptying their pockets and taking off their wrist-watches.

‘We pass through an orchard and, hearing the sound of the pursuing Russians coming closer, seek cover in a wood. Helmut Henn and I are a long way behind the rest of our group. The others wait for us and offer to carry us because he and I are so exhausted. Eventually, we reach a Fire Watch tower which has a small wooden hut at its foot. The comrades lift up some planks so that Helmut and I can creep inside and then bang them back into place with kicks from their boots. He and I are now alone. But not for long. Soon the Russians enter the hut and turn everything upside down. The sound of firing from within the woods draws the Russians away. We spend the rest of the day in our hiding-place and during the night break out intending to make our way through the Russian lines and to gain touch with a German units. After about eight nights of marching, some of which we spent in the Vienna woods, we give up the attempt. The Front lies too far away to the west. It was while we were in the Vienna woods that the end of the war came; on 8th May.’

## FREEDOM ON THE ELBE

In faraway Berlin fighting for the city was concluded on 2 May and a great mass of Red Army formations, released by the fall of the German capital, drove westward to reinforce the Soviet armies lining the River Elbe. Eisenhower, the western Supreme Commander, had ordered the British and American armies to halt on the west bank of the Elbe, but the Soviets, fearful that the forces of the Western Allies would cross the river and advance into eastern Germany, built up the strength of their forces facing the Americans.

To German civilians the Elbe was a magnet. They were convinced that whoever managed to cross it and enter the US Zone would be safe from the Red Army and free. This is the story of one civilian, L. Gruenhagen, who made the attempt:

‘Although I was not a soldier my story may be relevant to your book. At the end of the war I was ten years old and together with my family was



trying to escape from the Russians. We were on a trek from our home in Pomerania and had been on the road for weeks. Conditions which had been bad to begin with grew worse and there was little of the Volksgemeinschaft – the communal spirit – by the time we reached the River Elbe. In a great many cases it was the strongest who got through and survived.

‘We reached the eastern bank of the Elbe about 4th May and found there a great mass of people, refugees from many different parts of Germany, who had reached the river but who had not been allowed to cross to the western bank where the Americans were. We all wanted to reach their zone because we knew we would be safer with them than with the Red Army. I have since learned that the total numbers of people gathered on the eastern bank were in excess of two hundred thousand. We were all wet, cold, hungry and frightened, but we were civilians and the Americans would not let us cross. They were prepared to let German soldiers cross the river but the order that no civilians were to be let through was very strictly enforced and any refugees found mixing in with the military columns and hoping to escape were swiftly and not always gently taken back to the eastern bank.

‘There was an agreement between the Americans and the Russians not to allow refugees to enter the American zone and the Amis of Ninth Army were determined to keep to the letter of the agreement. By the 5th or 6th May the crowd of refugees had become desperate. We knew that the Russians were coming; that they were only 30kms distant and that between them and us there was only German Twelfth Army whose soldiers we knew were just hoping to save themselves from becoming prisoners of war.

‘Then on the 6th, when all seemed to be lost, a miracle happened. The Russian artillery opened fire. These Russian gunners had fought in Berlin and having regrouped were now driving towards the Tangermünde sector of the Elbe where they hoped to encircle and to destroy Wenck’s Twelfth Army. They obviously made a mistake in believing that we refugees were part of that Army. They used their heaviest artillery and then backed this up with medium artillery. No! that was not the miracle. That was that the shells and bombs did not fall among us civilian refugees but flew across the Elbe and exploded among the American units on the west bank.

‘The Russians took no notice of the Very lights which the Americans fired into the air. If anything the shelling became heavier as more artillery was brought closer to us. The Americans had a simple choice to stay and be killed or to withdraw. They pulled back for a distance of about 9 or 10kms and this left the west bank of the Elbe unoccupied. Almost immediately our soldiers took advantage of the situation and began to organize things. They launched every sort of craft that could float and brought these across to the eastern bank. These boats and floats were then loaded with civilians who were brought across to the western bank where they promptly vanished into the surrounding countryside. My family was lucky enough to get across very

quickly and I can remember the drizzling rain, the boat very low in the water, the smell of the river and the faces of the soldiers who rowed us across the Elbe. We climbed the river bank and after a long walk a farmer gave us a lift in a cart. My mother was crying because we had had to leave everything behind on the east bank. We had been told that no luggage could be taken, that it was more important to rescue people than suitcases which took up room. How many refugees escaped across the Elbe to the west I have no idea, but it must have been many thousands. The Russians who found our abandoned suitcases and rucksacks must have thought they had entered Paradise because those piles of luggage on the east bank of the Elbe were all filled with family treasures.'

# Collapse and Aftermath, 1945

## SURRENDER AND HUMILIATION

Now it was all over. The first surrender was signed in Italy. Then it was the German forces in north-west Europe that capitulated. The main ceasefire came into force on the Eastern Front on 9 May, but in Yugoslavia the fighting continued for many days more. Eventually, and at long last, after years of fighting the German forces had laid down their arms and passed into captivity.

For some units the surrender took the nature of a formal ceremony with officers wearing gloves and carrying daggers at their waists. This was particularly true of really élite formations which made the act of capitulation a ceremonial parade. Contingents of the Germanic SS, for example, drove into the American lines in Austria, with each vehicle spotlessly cleaned and immaculately serviced. Commanders leapt from their vehicles, formed up and marched in formation towards the place where the US senior officers were waiting to accept their surrender. It happened more than once that the tight-knit group of combat veterans was mobbed by groups of GIs and stripped of medals, decorations and awards by US soldiers, each of whom wanted a 'Nazi' souvenir.

On some battle fronts long lines of grey-faced men, exhausted by war, trudged into makeshift prison camps. For those on the Eastern Front kicks and beatings were followed by the selection and summary execution of hostages, a move designed to cow the survivors into submission. It was in the Balkans that the worst excesses took place. Mass executions, savage beatings and starvation were the norm. The cry of 'Vae victis!' did not just sound throughout Europe – it thundered out and the victors sat in judgement over the vanquished. They sat in judgement over men, women and children, for the US authorities sentenced to death or to life imprisonment young boys who had been condemned by courts martial as 'Wehrewolves'. The Red Army shot all the co-called 'terrorists' it caught and for years after the war's end hunted down the survivors in the Russian zone of occupation.

More than one German serviceman, recalling those first days and weeks after the end of the war, wrote of the humiliation of having to surrender to less worthy troops than themselves. Many wrote bitterly of the treatment they received because they had done their duty to the best of their ability.

In a subjective and punitive decision, the men of élite units were condemned as war criminals just because they had been members of just such a unit. That was the fate of the Fallschirmjaeger, the U-boat crews and, especially, those of the SS, some of whom were told that their sentence as prisoners of war would be for life. Many prisoners were subjected to physical or mental torture in an effort to break them. That the victor nations, fearing a resurgence of German nationalism, should seek to contain this by imprisoning the men of élite arms of service, was understandable as a short-term measure, but it seemed, in the first post-war months, as if this was no short-term policy but a long-term plan. The Cold War caused the Western Allies to rethink their policy *vis-à-vis* the former enemy – a rethink that had already been carried out in the eastern Zone. The prison camps were emptied of all but the most senior members of the SS and even their sentences were reduced in length. But before that change of policy came about a cynical manoeuvre changed the status of prisoners of war in American hands to that of Disarmed Enemy Forces. Under the terms of the Geneva Convention, prisoners of war have to be fed the same rations as the soldiers of the captor nation, Disarmed Enemy Forces do not. The consequence of that name-change was the death of nearly a million German servicemen from starvation and hunger-induced diseases.

In their zone of occupation the French had ‘fleshed out’ the depleted ranks of the Foreign Legion by recruiting former SS men. Thereby the French Army gained first-class soldiers and the SS men who survived their period of service with the Legion acquired French citizenship. The Russians, to begin with, treated all German servicemen as criminals because they had invaded the Soviet Union, and put them to years of hard labour. Only Great Britain did not take reprisals against the former enemy, although the government of the day considered its prisoners as additions to the work force in mines and on the land, and kept them until the end of 1947.

In his history of 12th SS Division ‘Hitler Youth’, Hubert Meyer wrote ‘The soldiers of the Waffen SS and a few “selected” personnel of the Wehrmacht who were in POW camps in West Germany, were released from prison camps under a Military Government Directive of 1 November 1946. They were then immediately re-arrested under the terms of the “automatic arrest” law and became civil internees. On 12 January 1946, the Allied Control Commission issued guide-lines to facilitate the removal of National Socialists and Militarists from the administration and other sectors. The American law of 5 March 1946, announced . . . release from civil internment camps was only permitted after “denazification”. This law defined all commanders of the Waffen SS as “criminals”. All other members of that organization were “contaminated” . . . The fact that a man had received decorations for bravery in the face of the enemy or had been promoted for that reason, counted against him . . . All those who were released from the

internment camps had to undergo some sort of "penance". This took the form of labouring in the internment camps, financial penalties, being excluded from one's former occupation or trade as well as the loss of voting rights either for a fixed time or for life.'

Reinhold Hoffmann, a former Fallschirmjaeger, wrote of his treatment:

'At the end of the war we prisoners were divided into one of three groups. The 'A' Group contained the anti-fascists. 'B' Group was made up of those who had supported the regime and the 'C' Group held those who were considered to be dyed-in-the-wool Nazis. The dirty work of deciding to which group one belonged was carried out by deserters from the German forces. One of these, a lieutenant, categorized me as "C Plus", because so far as he was concerned for me to have gained the "German Cross in Gold" at my rank indicated that I was worse than the worst SS swine.

'Because of that categorization I spent a year in Punishment Camp 282 at El Daba in the desert. At that place we received only half-rations and had to attend re-education classes in order to de-Nazify us. Those classes, too, were run by deserters. My father had been a life-long Social Democrat and not one of my family belonged to a Nazi organization. For me to be considered as a "C Plus", was the worst punishment that could have been inflicted.

'Like every other soldier in the world we had carried out our duty as the law demanded. Two of my brothers and two of my uncles fell in the war; a war which brought only loss and destruction.'

## ESCAPE

There were some German servicemen who sought to escape from their country's enemies by fleeing to neutral countries – not always successfully as Erich Kassel wrote:

'A soldier's life plays him many tricks, but none could have been a worst trick than that which was played upon those men who were interned in Sweden at the end of the war. The convoys of ships which evacuated the civilians and soldiers from the eastern provinces of Germany usually came under air or submarine attacks and were dispersed. It happened quite frequently that ports in west Germany at which individual ships arrived were often not those for which they had set out. The vessels of some dispersed convoys were driven so far off course that they arrived in Sweden, although, of course, some deliberately set course for that country.'

Kassel, who had served in an assault gun unit on the Eastern Front, was one of the survivors of a brigade which had reached Danzig and which was then sent to Hela to be evacuated.

'Our Brigade did not sail as a single group, for at this stage of the evacuation only small ships were still operating. One fairly large group of the brigade boarded a river steamer. Two other groups were carried on ferries and landing craft to a west German port where they were taken prisoner by the British. The group on the river steamer arrived in Sweden and was interned as were the other German soldiers who reached that country. They all assumed they would be held in internment until things had settled down in Germany, but in that belief they were disappointed. In November/December 1945, that is to say six months after the end of the war, the Swedes handed over to the Soviets all the German servicemen in their country. I do not know whether this was a contravention of human rights as many have claimed, but it was certainly moral cowardice on the part of the Swedes. A soldier's fate plays him many tricks. Those who were taken prisoner by the Western Allies had all been released by about 1947. Those who reached Sweden and, as they thought, safety did not return from the Soviet Union for a great many years.'

## UNREPENTANT

The question that remains is, what did the German serviceman think of his time under arms? This is a complex question for much depends upon the unit with which he served, the privations he underwent and his post-war recovery from the shock of Germany's defeat. With very few exceptions, those whose words are contained in these pages are proud to have fought for Germany. Among the correspondence that arrived too late to be included in an earlier book, *World War Two Through German Eyes*, was an item from Ulrich Luebke, who admitted he was an unrepentant nationalist.

'I thought it might be worthwhile to put the viewpoint of my type of German. Unlike many of my countrymen I do not agonize about the Second World War not make excuses that we fought it. I regret that Europe had to tear itself apart twice in my lifetime, but the fault was not Germany's. We did not declare war on you: it was you who declared war on us.

'I am now over 80 years old so that I was born when we still had an Emperor, although I have almost no recollection of those days. What I do have is a very strong recall of the misery of post-war years under the Weimar republic. My formative years I recall as time of personal deprivation and national humiliation. There was widespread unemployment and Germany was saddled with the burden of reparations because she was blamed for starting the war. I remember very well the electric charge that National Socialism gave to Germany and as a Party member I was proud to belong to a movement which exercised leadership and to a nation which was strong.

Once the National Socialists were elected we Germans seemed to regain our national pride and soon had a strong army, navy and air force. Germany, once again, was a powerful voice in Europe.

'I enlisted voluntarily into the army, and joined an infantry regiment, one which carried on the traditions of an élite Prussian grenadier regiment. I saw service in Poland but not in France during 1940, and remember the sense of uplift which that successful campaign brought about. We were all convinced that the war was over – all of us from the lowest to very highest in the land. After the French campaign a start was made to demobilize the older age groups, but that initiative was reversed when we made our pre-emptive strike against Russia.

'During the fighting for Smolensk I was wounded and when I rejoined my unit it was to find that the CO had decided that those of my age group were too old (at 32) to serve in a rifle company. Those who were affected were to be posted back to the depot in Prussia, where we would serve as instructors. The Ivans had other plans for us. On 8 November 1941, they made a massive attack along our sector of the front.

'It was shortly after midday and I was making my way from the front line to TAC Regimental HQ, which was about two kilometres away. It was bitterly cold and although there had been no heavy falls of snow there was a shallow covering on the ground. The hours of daylight in November are few, and the day was overcast with heavy clouds. I trudged along silently up the track towards RHQ from where I would go by lorry to the railhead and there take a train back to Germany. Suddenly, without warning, the barrage started. Shells crashed on to our forward positions and then crept across country towards me in waves of explosions. There was nothing to be done but wait until the fire and destruction had passed over me. When it did I was shaken but unwounded and stood up and began jog-trotting back to my old Company position. I knew the Company would be under pressure and that every man would be needed. As I trotted along a group of horsemen raced over the brow of a hill immediately to my left and some of them were so close that they almost ran me down. One of the Cossacks swung his horse towards me and struck at me with his sabre. It was a powerful blow to my upper left arm, just below the shoulder and it knocked me to the ground. It felt as if my arm had been broken and I saw there was blood on my gloves after I had touched the numbed area.

'I reached the Company positions – barns built round a sort of central courtyard in which a battle group from the Company preparing to go into a counter-attack. A sergeant saw me, took one look at my bloodied overcoat sleeve and called for the first-aid men. In the MI room when they removed my overcoat and jacket they must have realized that there was little that the Medical Officer could do. I would have to be evacuated to a main hospital and the medics warned me it was almost certain the arm could not be saved.



It had been so deeply cut that it was half-severed. Surprisingly there had been no great loss of blood as might have been expected and I did not feel dizzy or weak at all. It was probably the bitter cold that had reduced the flow of blood from the wound. The Medical Officer injected me with a drug which knocked me out and during the time I was unconscious I was evacuated and flown home. My left arm was amputated in a Leipzig hospital and that ended my active part in the War.

'I am not bitter that I lost an arm. My generation was brought up to believe that no sacrifice was too great for the Fatherland. The philosophy we were taught was that Germany must live, even if we had to die for it. Accepting that philosophy we believed, and I still believe, that we had to fight to break the ring which the capitalist nations of Europe had cast around us.'

## PROFESSIONALS

There were some who, in the words of the late Harry Gold, a Luftwaffe soldier in the anti-aircraft artillery, wished that 'the cup might pass from me'. The wounds that he had received in the last months of the war and which were not dealt with properly must have contributed to his early death at the age of 60. All Gold had wanted from life was to live in his North German home town, working as a bookbinder. When war came he was not immediately conscripted, but was called up early in 1944 and badly wounded in an air raid upon Berlin later that year. The amputation of his left leg might not have been necessary had the German medical service had the sulfa drugs and the penicillin available to the Western Allies. They did not and amputation was the only option open to German doctors to save a patient's life. The cup did not pass from Harry Gold and the bookbinder died prematurely.

The last words are those of Colonel Glasl, the commander of 100th Gebirgs Regiment. One day while making an inspection of the positions held by his men in the first days of the battle for Cassino, he turned to Helmut Hermann, the regimental adjutant who was accompanying him, and remarked, 'Do you know, I should very much prefer to be the Abbot of this Monastery than the commander of a regiment.' It is this attitude of carrying out to the best of one's ability a dangerous and distasteful task that is, I think most typical of those men and women of the German services whose stories fill this book.

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'When Tobruk fell the British ration stores fell into our hands undamaged. We were all impressed at the quantity and quality of British Army rations. They had marvellous tinned fruit from their colonies, various sorts of jars, corned beef – lots of corned beef – and meat and vegetable stew. We had, by comparison, very poor rations . . .'

' . . . as soon as we moved into the opening stages of our assault the Russian mass which had been thundering towards us suddenly halted . . . Even now, fifty years after the event I remember that day well and particularly the sight of that fleet of tanks whose wide front overlapped ours and which was echeloned in great depth. It was a huge block of tanks – line after line of white-painted machines whose vehicle numbers, painted in black, stood out against the white-painted turrets.'

'During the pauses in our bombardment I looked at the coast line through the artillery observer's high-powered periscope. The beach was black with people who had all fled from the advancing Soviets and who were making their way to us on the little boats which they had found on the beaches. The fire on the *Prinz Eugen's* guns helped to save the lives of many German people, to save them and at the same time, to stop the enemy . . .'

' . . . there seemed to be an air raid every day. We became very tired from lack of sleep, but the concentration upon our tasks kept us from thinking too much about the bombs that were falling. The daytime raids bombed whole areas – so called, carpet bombing. The night time ones aimed at specific targets. The carpet ones were the more frightening of the two. The experience of thousands of bombs exploding at the same time was a really frightening experience . . .'

'The tank stood in a garden about 125 metres away from us and the machine-gunner must have seen us for he concentrated his fire on the brick pillar at the smithy's entrance. He seemed to have an endless belt of ammunition. The pillar was about 40cm wide and machine-gun bursts tore whole bricks out. Then the tank's main armament opened up.'

Then searchlights swept across the water and fixed on the ship ahead and to our port side. We saw several flashes from behind one of the beams and soon realized that these must be from enemy guns because soon shells began to explode on the caïque. Soon she was alight and we could see our boys jumping into the sea. Our ship was illuminated by the fire and the lieutenant told us to put on our life-jackets and to remove our heavy, nailed boots. Barely had we done this when we too were caught by the searchlights and shells began to hit our ship.'

'We have excellent targets. The Squadron Leader gives the signal to attack and immediately the pilot puts our plane into a steep dive. We dive and dive, towards the enemy. As the pilot makes last-minute adjustments I look out and see our target, a group of five tanks moving away at high speed. The pilot corrects the direction by a fraction and then there is a slight jump as the first bombs are released.

'If frost got into an open wound the man was unlikely to be saved. It was better to be dead than to be wounded. In all of us, from the simplest private to the commander, doubts began to nag, but we comforted ourselves with the thought that "those up there" would have taken note of the mistakes that had been made and would avoid them in future. There was nothing else we could do but grit our teeth and not give up hope . . .'

'The train left about midnight from a blacked-out, empty station but imagine our joy when we found in our compartment boys with whom we had served in the Hitler Youth organization. We were all going to the same place and at each station more and more men of our own age entered the compartment each of them carrying the cardboard box or little suitcase – the mark which identified us all.'

'Suddenly an Me 262 dropped vertically and crashed. Its pilot was Nowotny, an ace with 250 "kills". The question did not need to be asked; if so experienced a pilot could be shot down, what chance would the totally untrained boys of the Hitler Youth have?'