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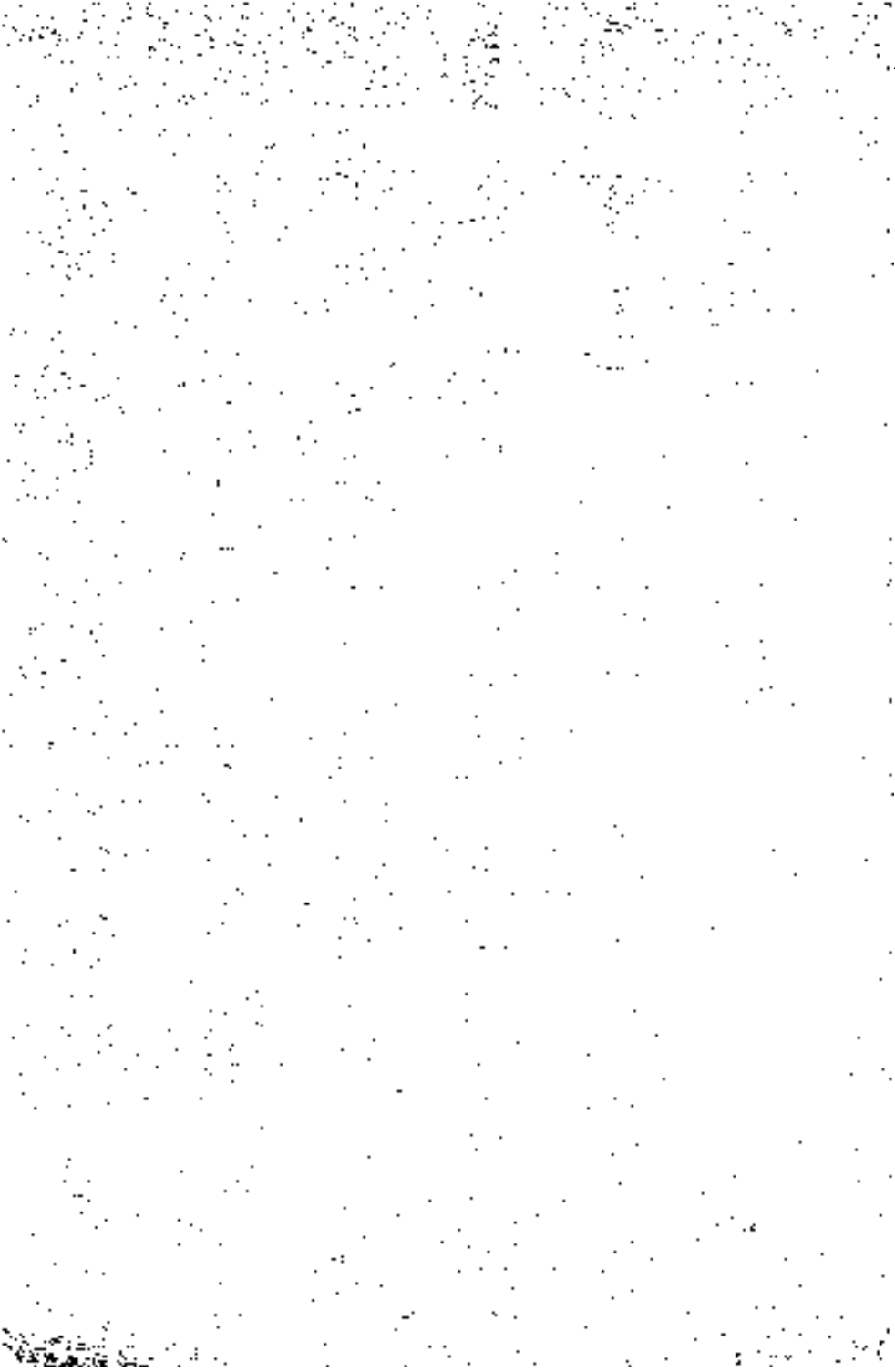


HITLER'S ENFORCERS

LEADERS OF THE GERMAN WAR MACHINE
1939-1945

JAMES LUCAS

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1939-1945**

JAMES LUCAS

CASSELL & CO

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This book is dedicated
with every expression of deep love to my wife,
Edeltraude, as an expression of thanks for her
encouragement and support throughout
my writing career.

The writing of this volume and its preparation for publication have been made possible through the aid of a great number of friends and colleagues. So many were involved in the writing and the production that it is impossible to list them all. Through them I was supplied with original documents, and on my behalf they carried out document and photographic research in European and American archives. I acknowledge with sincere thanks my debt to them all for help so unselfishly given.

The names of just a few of them and of the institutions they used are given at the end of the book, and I ask the pardon of those who have had to be omitted. Shortage of space alone prevents their inclusion, but my gratitude includes them all.

James Lucas, London, 1996

Introduction

In every major army there are men who rise from lowly rank to the heights of military fame as a result of their own ability. These are the men of whom biographies are written, around whom legends are woven, to whom special names are given and who win respect not only from the soldiers of their own side but also from their opponents. When one considers the war in Africa it is Erwin Rommel - the Desert Fox - whose name is foremost in the minds and mouths of veterans.

The history of the German Army which fought the Second World War is filled with the names of soldiers like him, to whom nicknames or descriptions had been given. One of the most famous commanders was Model, celebrated as the 'Fuehrer's Fireman', who rose from the rank of Colonel to Field Marshal in a few short years. His fame rested not only on the fact that he was a successful and aggressive commander, but more upon his unsurpassed defensive skills. For contrasted during the middle and later years of the war, 'Smiling Albert' was the complimentary epithet given to Kesselring, an outstandingly successful commander both in the Luftwaffe and the Army who became Supreme Commander of the whole southern combat zone during the last weeks of the war.

Inevitably, some officers received nicknames which were not complimentary. August von der Heydte, who led the last major German paratroop drop in December 1944, during the Battle of the Bulge, was given the mocking title the 'Rinsary Pan' by Reichsmarschall Goering because he was a devout Catholic.

There are soldiers in these pages whose innovations influenced the way in which war was fought. In addition to those who gained military victories at the highest strategic level. Among the innovators is Student, whose Flieger Korps captured Crete, and Witzig, who, with a small number of men, seized the Belgian fortress of Eben Emael. Among the strategists is von Manstein, arguably the best of that generation of the Second World War. Others are included because their heroic acts demand acknowledgment, like panzer commander Wittmann, who almost singlehandedly halted the attack by an entire British armoured brigade by destroying more than twenty armoured fighting vehicles in a matter of minutes. Another is Hyazinth von Strachwitz, whose raids deep into enemy territory were legendary.

If, as I have written, the German Army had in its ranks a great many officers of outstanding ability, what was the rationale behind my selection of the fifteen men whose deeds are recorded in this book? Why, for example, was tank commander Wittmann selected and Barkmann, another successful panzer man, omitted? Why include Rommel and omit Guderian? Why choose Weidinger, who led a battlegroup on the Eastern Front, and exclude Scherer, who, isolated and surrounded, held the land bridge and village of Cholm for three months? Firstly, in a book of this length only a limited number of officers can be included. In my opinion, those selected had an extra dimension which, in military affairs, separates warriors of brilliance from those who are only first class. Although my choice is subjective, I believe it covers the widest possible spectrum of battle experience.

It will be appreciated that the accounts of many of the victories won by the men featured in this book will read as if they were citations for awards and medals. It has to be admitted that some of the accounts are based on citations. Others are post-battle reports written by the officers who were there, which I have expanded. The reports are factual, sober documents not given to exaggeration or hyperbole. Indeed, the report of one panzer commander who claimed an unusually high number of victories was not believed, and to establish its truth a commission of officers was sent out. It found out that he had, in fact, 'killed' more enemy machines than he had claimed. Because the wording of the post-battle reports and of the recommendations for decorations was restrained, I have endeavoured to give colour to those neutrally-phased official records.

A text length of 80,000 words does not permit a detailed description of the actions of Hitler's men and, therefore, the reader must use his imagination to add the missing colours. Reading between the lines, he must visualise the dramas that can only be outlined in my words and see, in his mind's eye, the nature of the furious battles described. It will, perhaps, be of help if the reader is made aware that certain features are common to the lives of many of the officers whose careers are recounted in the following pages. To understand the reason for those common features, it is necessary for certain politico-military aspects of German history to be outlined.

Before the Great War of 1914-1918, Germany was an Empire whose eastern provinces included certain areas of what had once been Poland. In the 18th and early 19th centuries the territory of the former Poland was divided between the empires of Austria-Hungary, Germany and Russia. Those empires had common frontiers, and for the defence of their territories each held substantial military forces close to the national border. But, in addition to that defensive posture, all three countries prepared plans of military aggression against the neighbour State.

The creation of a German Empire in 1871 united the former kingdoms, principalities and dukedoms of Germany into a loose federal confederation. That

act of unification was viewed with alarm by nations bordering Germany, who saw it as a drift towards militarism. Those nations then expanded their armies to meet the threat which they thought Germany presented, and their expansions led in turn to Germany enlarging her own armed forces to meet what she saw as foreign challenges.

From the early 19th century conscription had supplied the rank and file for the human mass which formed the German Army. As explained above, late in the 19th century the Army's expansion had been so rapid that there was a shortage of commissioned ranks. To overcome that deficiency it was necessary to relax the rigid standards by which an officer's commission had formerly been gained. From the earliest days of a formally established standing army, the route to a commission had been for an 'Aspirant', as he was called, to enter a cadet school and to go from there into a military academy. Having passed out from that institution he took up service in a regiment. Such a route was the one preferred by the military authorities because the 'Aspirant' was already disciplined by having undergone basic military training. One element of that training was the skill of team management, the most necessary requirement of an officer.

Faced with a shortage of officers, the Army of the late 19th century had to open a second path to allow non-aristocrats to obtain a commission. That path was through higher education: the gaining of a matriculation certificate and/or an academic degree. As a generalisation it would be true to say that as late as the final decades of the 19th century the cadet school route was still the avenue used by the aristocracy and the traditional military families, while the education route was the path chosen by the bourgeoisie.

Until that new route was set up, an officer's commission had been viewed as the prerogative of the aristocrats. As a result of class distinctions and the fact that the Army was usually the instrument used by the State to put down rebellion and revolution, there had usually been friction between it and the common people. This was particularly the case after the year of Revolution - 1848. After that year the role of the military was more and more challenged by reactionary forces, and that hostility endured until well into the second half of the 19th century. Then hostility began to ebb and finally vanished. This came about chiefly because of a sense of national pride, of improved social conditions and because of the Army's now liberal views towards the bourgeoisie. In time the armed forces came to be seen as a national force, uniting all the people, and less and less as the instrument of royal oppression. Parents considering their sons' career prospects saw that an officer's commission offered a regular, pensionable post. More than that, it also had the advantages that promotion in the military field could bring about an improvement in one's social position. All of those things could be gained through application, diligence and hard work.

Once he was commissioned, the new officer had to be approved by the sergeants of his future regiment. It was for them to decide whether the new man

would fit in and become a good regimental comrade. Service life in peacetime was a continual round of deadly routine and boring duties. Promotion was slow, but upon attaining the rank of captain an officer could elect either to remain with the regiment and await slow advancement to the next promotional step, or join the General Staff with its faster prospects of advancement but with the continual threat of his being returned to unit if he failed the many and difficult examinations.

After the First World War most of the senior officers featured in this volume elected for the General Staff route and rose, during the Second World War, to posts of high authority. Many had served during the First World War on the Southern, Eastern or Western Front, and in several instances some had fought on two, or all three. In addition to those, there are several men named in this text who had not served in the Great War. Two of them, Weidinger and Wittmann, were SS officers who gained their commissions by rising through the ranks. This had always been possible, and in time of war bravery in the field could result in the granting of a commission, although this was rare. In the years of the Third Reich, bravery and/or service led to many soldiers or NCOs being posted to an SS military academy where they were taught the duties of a junior officer. Thus a commission which, in the earliest years of German military history, had been almost exclusively a matter of birth, became available in the late 19th century to those with appropriate education. Then, after 1933, it could be gained by brave, skilled soldiers who had been imbued with the political, revolutionary spirit of National Socialism.

At the end of the First World War many men who were to rise to the highest ranks were still subalterns, and it seemed to them that their career prospects had suddenly ended. The Regular Army, as such, had almost ceased to exist. They faced the reality that whole regions of their country had been annexed under the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles and handed over to the Poles or to the French. In the eastern provinces there were also incursions and raids by Polish regular and irregular forces, who claimed that territory which Germany had not had to surrender under the treaty was historically Polish. Under Versailles the German Army was a rump, and was not only forbidden to act against the Polish incursions, but was also forbidden to build either tanks or heavy artillery. Because the use of German Regular troops to counter the Polish incursions was forbidden by the Allies, the units which went out to defend the German East had to be volunteer contingents. A great many former ex-servicemen of the Great War served in one of the military volunteer bodies known, generally, as the Freikorps. The soldiers in these Freikorps contingents fought until the situation in the east returned to normal and the Poles had withdrawn from German territory. Many then volunteered for and were accepted into the ranks of the Regular Army.

The Versailles prohibitions on the construction of tanks or artillery were rigidly enforced by Allied inspections, and the German Army was also forbidden

to have either a General Staff or troop training facilities. It is hardly surprising that, in the 1920s, the republican government of Weimar concluded a secret and illegal pact with Soviet Russia. Under the terms of the Rapallo Treaty, the tanks forbidden to be built in Germany were constructed in Russian factories, and were used in mock battles by German military units secretly undergoing training in restricted areas of the Soviet Union. That pact between the Weimar and the Soviet governments provided the opportunity for the future leaders of the panzer forces and of the Luftwaffe to practise battle tactics in remote areas of Russia. The German General Staff, which was forbidden by Versailles, was seen to be abolished, but the Allies did not realise that it had been promptly re-formed under an innocuous name and its leaders given experience, in the Soviet Union, of handling large forces of men.

It was obvious that Germany, restricted by the bounds of Versailles, would look for ways of circumventing the limitations, and the many attempts at seeking to salvage and regain national pride and honour are not to be wondered at. Adolf Hitler ended the period of Germany's subservience to the Treaty of Versailles and initiated a programme of rearmament which within years restored Germany to the status of a major European power. The Second Great War, which opened in 1939 and became a world-wide conflict, saw Germany and her allies, nations with finite resources in raw materials and manpower, facing a combination of countries whose resources, if not infinite, were considerably greater. Hitler gambled on winning all of his campaigns in swift and decisive blitzkrieg-type operations. He gambled and lost, for, in addition to the raw materials and manpower which the Allies possessed, they also had time on their side. Germany did not, and when the blitzkrieg tactics no longer brought results was certain to be defeated.

It is not to be wondered at that the military forces of Hitler's Third Reich triumphed in the campaigns which they initiated in the first years of the Second World War, for the aggressor always enjoys an initial advantage. But the soldiers and commanders of the Reich's armed forces gained victory after victory and continued to do so (admittedly in defensive warfare and only at a tactical level) up to the closing stages of that conflict, testifying to the outstanding military qualities and the battlefield skills of the commanders whose lives are recorded here, and who are representative of all of Hitler's men.

Faithful Sepp

Oberstgruppenfuehrer Josef Dietrich,
Panzer General der Waffen SS

Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich did not have a good press in the world except in those countries which, during the Second World War, were dominated or influenced by the Third Reich. In Germany's media, as well as in that of the countries allied to her, he was a military legend. Such is the power of negative propaganda, however, that while Red Army generals with working-class backgrounds were lauded by the Western media for their military ability, Dietrich, who had the same background, was looked upon as a bar-room brawler without any sort of military strategic skill.

He was born on 28 May 1892 in the village of Hawangen near Memmingen in Swabia, from where the family moved in 1900 to Kempen in the Allgau. His first employment was as a cart driver, but that position was un congenial and soon, like many other German young men of the period, he became a Wander-vogel, tramping the highways of his own country and subsequently those of Austria and Italy. In 1911 Dietrich returned to Germany to begin his compulsory military service, and much is unclear concerning this part of his early life. Although he claimed to have served as a regular soldier in a Lancor (Lancer) regiment, documents indicate that he was an artilleryman who was invalided out of the Army after falling from a horse.

On 6 August 1914, two days after Britain declared war on Germany, Dietrich enlisted in the 7th Field Artillery regiment of the Bavarian Army. For reasons which only he could know he was later to claim that he had joined the 1st Ulans (Lancer) regiment and that he had transferred from the cavalry to the infantry and specifically into the 4th Infantry Regiment. What can be proved from the records is that, in October 1914, Dietrich was in action in Flanders with the 6th Bavarian Reserve Artillery Regiment. It is likely that in the last week of October he first fought against the British Army when the Division with which he was serving formed part of a major military grouping which had been ordered to capture Ypres. That town was the key to Flanders, and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) fought as hard to hold it as the German Army struggled to capture it. The resistance put up by the British and French armies thwarted every German attack, and by the middle of November the mobile warfare which had characterised the

Just months had halted as both sides dug trench lines whose position was to remain almost unchanged for the four years of the Great War. During those years Dietrich was wounded several times; the first was a shrapnel wound in the lower part of his right leg and the second a lance thrust over the left eye. He was later to suffer other wounds, the most serious being that to the side of his head, inflicted during the fighting on the Somme.

Dietrich claimed to have served on the Italian Front and to have received an award for bravery from the Austrians. During 1916 the German High Command, seeking to break the trench-line stalemate on the Western Front, formed infantry and artillery Storm Troop battlegroups. The initial successes of these small assault detachments led to their being expanded to include machine-gun sections, light mortar teams, burning squads and flame-thrower groups. Such units were known as Sturmabteilungen (Storm battalions). Dietrich became a member of No. 2 battalion serving with German 3rd Army. Although the strategic intention had been to create a force of Sturmabteilungen strong enough to achieve a breakthrough on the Western Front, this did not happen. There were too few battalions, although at tactical level they proved invaluable in local operations.

At this point it is necessary to touch upon the character of the storm troops, for this has a bearing on the SS organisation which Dietrich later commanded. The storm troops were first-class fighting men, and both the officers and other ranks considered themselves an elite, the pick of the nation's warriors. Relations between the ranks were less formal than in conventional units and the officers and men often messed together. The storm troop units had to be rested more frequently than the standard formations, for the demands made upon them in battle were greater and more intense. Dietrich absorbed the characteristics of the storm units and in later years, when he commanded the Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler', applied similar principles to that SS formation, particularly in the concept of discipline based upon respect for the person and not upon the rank he carried.

During the Second World War SS officers and men were to fight with the fervour of the old storm troops, becoming with experience almost invincible in attack and rock solid in defence. But the implementation of Dietrich's concepts within the SS establishment were still many years away. Immediately ahead lay the great offensives of 1917 and 1918, during which new tactics of infiltration were evaluated, tested and applied, often with great effect. In November 1917 Dietrich won the Second Class Iron Cross, and three months later he was posted to the Bavarian Storm Tank detachment. The German Army's High Command acknowledged the value of an armoured fighting vehicle with cross-country capabilities and ordered male-type machines armed with an artillery piece and machine-guns. The tank arm was organised by battalions, each comprising five officers and 108 other ranks equipped with five armoured fighting vehicles

British male-type tanks which had been captured were taken on charge and in time there were three battalions equipped with native vehicles and six others with captured machines. Dietrich served with a Bavarian battalion as a gunner in a captured tank.

His first 'mount' went into action on 1 June 1918, in the Chemin des Dames sector. Mechanical failure reduced the number of machines which took part in that operation, but Moritz, Dietrich's vehicle, performed well and gave excellent support to the advancing infantry until it 'hollered' in a large shell hole. The driver's efforts to bring the machine back on to firm ground caused the engine to overheat and a French counterattack which had driven back the German infantry threatened to capture the tank. Lieutenant Fuchsbauer, the vehicle's commander, decided that Moritz would have to be blown up to deny its use to the Allies. Dietrich was one of the three-man demolition team selected for the task, and in later years boasted of winning the respect of his comrades for salvaging a bottle of Schnapps under heavy fire. The demolition crew were awarded medals, and Dietrich received the Bavarian Military Service Cross, Third Class.

His next action occurred to the south-east of Soissons on 15 July, and during this operation Dietrich's tank was knocked out, together with all the others in the battalion. It was not until 9 October that his battalion went into battle again, but the mechanical failure of Dietrich's machine kept him out of that action. The unit's final mission came on 1 November 1918, when four vehicles supported a counterattack in the Curgies area of Valenciennes. This operation regained some ground which had been taken in an Allied attack, but it was lost again on the following day. Dietrich returned to Germany, which had not only lost the war but was degenerating into revolution, and was demobilised in March 1919.

In those immediate post-war years Germany was in turmoil, and the republican government saw the military as the only organised body capable of restoring order both internally and externally. But Germany's standing Army was not allowed to undertake military operations, so recourse had to be made to public-spirited ex-soldiers who were recruited into what were known as Freikorps Rifle Groups and organised along Storm Detachment lines. Nothing is known of Dietrich's activities during that period of post-war political unrest, but by 1920 he had enlisted into the Bavarian State Police, a paramilitary force in which his military training and former rank of sergeant brought him the command of men and a detachment of vehicles in the reconnaissance platoon.

The victorious Allies intended to detach from Germany, by force majeure, part of the province of Silesia, with its rich iron and coal resources, and to give it to the new Polish state. To legalise that proposed forced transfer of territory a plebiscite was held in March 1921. Although the Allies confidently predicted that the result would show that the electorate wished to stay part of Poland, it showed that a majority of the native population wished to remain German. The

decision so inflamed the Poles that a group of their irregular and regular troops decided to seize the disputed territories, and crossed the frontier. The Allies would not allow German regular units to expel the invaders, and the local detachments formed to defend the area were not sufficiently strong. In desperation the German government turned for help to the Freikorps. Dietrich, who had been given leave of absence from the police force, served with 1st Battalion's No. 2 Company in the Oberland Freie Korps. The Oberlanders' first objective was the Annaberg, whose convent was not only a place of pilgrimage but also an area of great emotional value to the German population. In a military sense its capture was important, for it commanded the ground on the right bank of the river Oder.

The attack to seize the Annaberg went in at 0230 on 21 May 1921, with two regiments 'up': the Oberland on the left and another Freikorps formation on the right flank. The feature was quickly captured and held against furious counterattacks which persisted until the Poles pulled out of Silesia on 5 July. For his part in these military operations Dietrich received the coveted Order of the Silesian Eagle, 2nd and 1st Classes, and although the fighting had officially ended he remained in the disputed area long after the remainder of his unit. Eventually he returned home to resume his police career.

During this time he would have heard Hitler speak at open-air meetings. Although he sympathised with the Nazi Party's ideals to the extent of taking part in the abortive Munich putsch of November 1923, Dietrich did not join the party until several years later. It was, perhaps, because of his involvement in the November putsch that he either left or was retired from the police force in the following month with the rank of captain. He worked for several years in a succession of menial civilian jobs before joining the Nazi Party on 1 May 1928. Only days later he enlisted in the SS, the second of the Nazi party's paramilitary organisations and the one formed to protect its speakers at political rallies. The SS was, therefore, few in numbers compared with the SA (the Sturm Abteilung, or Storm Troops), the brown-shirted mass of Party soldiers which numbered over 72,000 as early as 1927.

Dietrich's rise in the SS was fast. Promotion to commissioned rank came in June 1928, command of the Munich Standarte (regiment) followed two months later, and by May of the following year he commanded the SS Brigade Bavaria. The Nazi Party did not pay its soldiers, and Dietrich worked in the Eber Publishing House. As a second duty he acted as a bodyguard to Adolf Hitler. In the 1930 elections Dietrich was elected to the Reichstag and was given command of the entire SS organisation in southern Germany. A permanent bodyguard detachment known as the SS Begleit Kommando 'Der Fuehrer' (SS Escort Group 'Der Fuehrer'), with a strength of twelve specially selected men, was formed in February 1931.

In 1933, with the Nazi Party now the official government of Germany, Hitler ordered that a new body be created to protect the Reichschancellery in

Berlin, Dietrich raised the 117-man-strong 'SS Headquarters Guard Dietrich'. That same year Hitler ordered military training to be given to the SS, and in particular to the elite SS Sonderkommandos Berth, Lutoborg and Zossen. These battalion-sized detachments were then amalgamated to form the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler (the Adolf Hitler bodyguard regiment of the SS, or LSSAH). During the Roehm crisis of 1934 the Leibstandarte served under Hitler's direct orders to suppress Roehm's SA. The Fuehrer kept the Army out of this Party crisis, although military transport was used to carry the Leibstandarte to southern Germany. The SA leaders were arrested and shot, a task which Dietrich found distressing because so many of them had been his comrades in the Freikorps, but his unquestioning and unwavering loyalty to Hitler brought promotion to Obergruppenfuhrer (lieutenant general).

The next step in the history of the SS and in Dietrich's advancement came when Himmler resolved to form the several types of SS unit into a 'Verfuegrungs' Division (VD); armed units available for special duties. The Waffen or armed SS had come into being. When Dietrich learned that the Leibstandarte was to be amalgamated into the VD Division he realised that its independence was threatened and complained to Hitler, who ordered that it was to remain outside Himmler's control, which it did to the end of the war. Meanwhile there had been a series of political developments in Europe, in many of which Dietrich and his men took part. On 28 February 1935 Hitler ordered the Leibstandarte to move into the Saarland, where a plebiscite was to be held. The appearance of these tall, well-built and highly disciplined men illustrated the positive aspect of national socialism, and must have influenced the Saarlander population to vote overwhelmingly to stay in the Reich.

Under Dietrich the LSSAH, an infantry formation, acquired a high reputation for turn-out and ceremonial drill, but he was dissatisfied with its infantry role and demanded to be issued with tanks. Although this first attempt at upgrading the LSSAH failed, the Standarte became better armed and was authorised to raise an armoured car platoon in July 1936. The Army's relations with the Nazi Party and the SS were not cordial, but it was soon noticeable that a distinct gulf yawned between the older SS commanders such as Dietrich, Steiner and Hauser, all of whom had been front-line soldiers in the First World War, and the younger officers, who were graduates from the SS Military Academies. The older men respected and trusted the Army, whereas the younger men were influenced against it by Himmler, a Party official determined to create an SS Empire.

In March 1938 the Standarte was on the establishment of Guderian's XVI Panzer Corps and Dietrich led the LSSAH, which was on Corps' establishment, into Austria. The Standarte returned to Berlin but was called out again, once more under Guderian, with whom Dietrich had a strong rapport, when the German Army entered the Sudetenland. Hitler's aggression finally resolved France and Great Britain to sign a pact with Poland, and the invasion of that republic in

1 September 1939 brought about a war in whose opening operations Dietrich and the LSSAH came under the command of XIII Corps as the only motorised formation in that corps.

The campaign in Poland was brief but bitter, and certainly not the easily-won 'lightning' war depicted by the Reich's war reporters. One interesting feature of that campaign came towards its end, when the Standarte was posted to Reinhardt's 4th Panzer Division to 'boof up' that formation's attack on Warsaw. What was not known either at Standarte or at divisional level was that two Polish armies which had fought well in western Poland were battling their way eastwards to strengthen the Warsaw garrison. Both were advancing on a line that would take them on a collision course with Reinhardt's 4th Panzer Division and the LSSAH. Unable to reinforce 4th Panzer, the German High Command (OKW) issued orders that not only was it to maintain pressure against the Polish capital, but it was also to block the advance of the two enemy armies. The attempts to carry out both tasks involved the 4th and the Leibstandarte in a two-front battle, during which many of their units stood back-to-back, some facing eastwards towards Warsaw and the others westwards towards the Bzura river. Urged on by Dietrich, the Standarte fought a superlative defensive battle and at Piastow forced the Poles back. The OKW then ordered an offensive to be undertaken in which the Standarte was to advance northwards along both banks of the Bzura river until the Vistula was reached. This successful operation trapped a major part of the Polish forces and the LSSAH played a leading role in the destructive fighting which reduced that pocket.

The participation of Dietrich's unit in the German-Polish war did not end there. He took it northwards to Modlin, where part of the Polish capital's permanent defence system was located. The Standarte had been given a defensive task, which was not one to the liking of Dietrich and his senior commanders, who all believed in aggressive action. The Leibstandarte fought an offensive battle with such determination that it quickly captured one of the principal forts. With Poland vanquished there was a brief period of rest and reorganisation before training began for the War in the West against France and Great Britain. The OKW battle plan also foresaw attacks upon Belgium and Holland, but the armed services of those nations presented little threat to the unfolding of the German plan. The French and British armies, being larger, were the main enemies and, if Germany was not to be involved in a re-run of the Great War, some new strategy would have to be devised to defeat them. This strategy is described in the chapter of this book devoted to Manstein, the officer who planned it.

For the campaign in the West the Leibstandarte served with 227th Division, and when operations began at dawn on 10 May 1940 it raced across the Dutch border, advanced 72km and succeeded in capturing, undamaged, a number of bridges across several rivers. Under the command of 9th Panzer Division, to which it had been transferred, the LSSAH was ordered to icing out

the Fallschirmjäger who had dropped near Rotterdam on the first day of the war, and when that task was completed it was to drive on to the Eftague. During the advance to the seat of the Dutch government a potentially serious incident occurred. Dietrich's men in the southern part of Rotterdam opened fire on what they thought were armed Dutch soldiers. The enemy troops were, in fact, surrendering to General Student, Commanding the German airborne forces. In the fire fight which resulted from the confusion of mistaken identity Student was hit in the head, and evidence points to the shot having been fired by the Leibstandarte.

Dutch resistance was soon broken, and after a succession of temporary attachments to other units the Standarte rejoined Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps and took positions in the cordon of German units encircling Dunkirk, specifically along the line of the Au canal to the west of St Omere. Hitler ordered the troops manning the Dunkirk perimeter to halt their advance, but Dietrich disobeyed the order and sent his 3rd battalion across the canal, where it captured a piece of high ground, the Waquesberg. He justified his disobedience with the explanation that the enemy defenders were 'looking down our throats'. Dietrich moved towards Wormhout when Hitler's restrictive order was lifted, and on 28 May, his birthday, he drove towards the combat zone to co-ordinate an attack upon the village. En route his car was shot up by British troops and he was forced to hide in a ditch.

The war in Flanders came to an end with the withdrawal of the BEF from Dunkirk, and Dietrich's Standarte was sent to fight in the second campaign, to destroy the French Army. Once again under the command of 9th Panzer Division, the Leibstandarte drove through central and southern France, arriving just south of Lyons on 24 June. The campaign in the west ended on 25 June, and many Germans were of the opinion that it was the end of the war. For his part in the successful battle for France, Dietrich was awarded the Knight's Cross to accompany the 1st and 2nd classes of the Iron Cross which he had won in Poland.

Then came news that the Standarte was to be expanded to Brigade size, and shortly thereafter Dietrich was advised that his formation was to take part in the Balkan campaign. It moved to south-western Bulgaria and came under the command of XL Corps (12th Army). The battle experience gained by Dietrich's formation during the fighting in the west had improved its fighting ability. In Poland the LSSAH has had them, but lack of training had led to unnecessarily high losses. That deficiency in training was made good during the winter of 1939-40, and when the Leibstandarte took the field to fight in the west its battalions functioned well. In the Balkan campaign it evolved into a fine fighting formation whose spirit and skill were praised by Army generals. Much of the credit for the unit's performance was due to the personal interest Dietrich took in his men's welfare. The basic tenet of every commander from the lowest to the highest is that the comfort and welfare of the men is the first consideration.

Dietrich had learned that basic commandment as an NCO, and he did not depart from it as a general.

Awareness that their commander was doing his best for them brought the response from the rank and file that they must do their best for him. This they did in Greece, capturing the vital Klidi pass in a three-day battle and then going on to seize the Klisura and Katara passes. The capture of the Katara pass hastened the end of Greek resistance. On 20 April Dietrich and General Tsolakoglou arranged the surrender between them, which included the Italian forces that had been fighting in the campaign. Mussolini was furious that the surrender had taken place without his being consulted, and insisted that the Greek general sign another surrender document. The Leibstandarte then raced down to Corinth, hoping to overtake and trap the retreating British Army, but much of the expeditionary force had already been taken off by the Royal Navy. Dietrich's style of leadership played a large part in the victory, and one of his officers wrote that if Dietrich had not been such an inspiration, the Greek campaign might have had a different outcome.

The war in Greece ended during April, and that against Russia opened towards the end of June. Taking that brief period of peace Hitler decided to raise the Leibstandarte to divisional status, and the war against the Soviet Union saw it serving with Army Group South and quickly acquiring a reputation for bravery and military skill which was acknowledged by General Kempf, commanding XLVIII Corps. In an order of the day issued at the conclusion of the bitter battle of Uman, it was during the fighting around Korch, at the approaches to the Crimea, that Dietrich's Division first acted in the role of a fire brigade. During the night of 23/24 September the Red Army's attacks tore a gap in the front held by 3rd Romanian Army. The breach had to be closed quickly because there was a danger that German 11th Army would be cut off. Dietrich raced his formation to Gavrilovka, where its first assaults halted the Soviet forces flooding through the breach, then vigorous counterattack drove them back and sealed the line.

On 16 October 1941 the Division captured Taganrog, but then the weather broke. Heavy rain and more determined Russian resistance wore down the strength of the German attacking formations and so depleted the Leibstandarte companies that they were reduced to only a third of their strength. Indeed, a return dated 30 November showed that the Division had only 157 officers and 4,556 men, against a war establishment of 290 officers and 9,700 men. Shocked by the high losses suffered by all the military units, but particularly by the Division that carried his name, Hitler flew to Marburg for a meeting with Dietrich. For his services in the campaign the Leibstandarte's commander was awarded the Oak Leaf to the Knight's Cross. He received this in Berlin, where his popularity among the Party's mid guard was at its highest. He spent three nights in the Chancellery as Hitler's personal guest and at the celebration to mark Goering's birthday, was lauded as the pillar of the Eastern Front. Dietrich married on 19 January

1942, but before the end of the month had returned to his Division in Russia. Slowly more units were added to the Leibstandarte's Order of Battle, including a battalion each of panzers and SPs. Although these additions had been authorised during February, many did not come on charge until May.

Hitler's increasing concern about the situation in the west caused him to order the setting up of a special, fast, trans-European railway service. The concept was that, in the event of a crisis developing on either battlefield, he could transfer major units by the 'lightning express' network between the eastern and western theatres of operation. The first formation which Hitler sent westwards using the new 'lightning express' was Dietrich's Division, which arrived in the Paris area during the third week of July. Hitler decided that an SS Corps was to be formed, and ordered that the three motorised Divisions which were to form it, 'Leibstandarte', 'Das Reich' and 'Totenkopf', were to be upgraded to Panzer Grenadier status, but the serious military situation on the Eastern Front did not allow the three formations to be concentrated for many months.

During the autumn of 1942 the Leibstandarte's panzer battalion was enlarged to become a two-battalion regiment, but then, as if the problems concerning the expansion and reorganisation of the SS Panzer Corps were not a sufficient worry, Dietrich received a communication from Himmler condemning him for allowing 2,000 of his men to be infected with venereal disease during their service in Russia, and demanding an explanation. Dietrich checked the allegation and then replied to Himmler quoting the true facts; the actual number was 244. In that connection a surreal discussion was conducted at higher SS level about sexual intercourse between the racially pure Germans of the SS and racially inferior Russian women. Dietrich declared that the ruling which had been introduced by the SS authorities in Kiev did not apply to the Leibstandarte; it is likely that the Divisional commander, who had himself been a front-line warrior, subscribed to the old soldiers' claim that a rampant male member has no conscience.

The Leibstandarte returned from France to the Eastern Front and to Kharkov, a city under threat from the Soviet winter offensive, and which Hitler had ordered must be held to the last. Subsequent events connected with the fighting for Kharkov must have made Dietrich realise how vast a gulf yawned between the soldiers of the battlefield and the politicians in the Homeland. The Soviet offensive had breached the German line between the Leibstandarte and the Division on its right flank, the 320th. It was vital that the line be resealed, and Dietrich led a large battlegroup in bitter winter conditions to gain touch with the 320th and bring this about. The breach was sealed, but because the Soviets had all but surrounded Kharkov, Hausser, commander of 1st SS Panzer Corps, decided to evacuate the city despite Hitler's direct order. In later months, when Dietrich was asked what reserves he had had when the evacuation order was issued, he is said to have replied: 'Behind me was four hundred kilometres of

empty space. It was very plain that Fuehrer headquarters had no idea of the privations under which the troops on the ground were living, nor of the bitterness of the battles they were fighting. Manstein's strategy, which had brought about the deliberate evacuation of Kharkov, also brought about its recapture on 14 March, and Dietrich's panzers led the advance into the city, a success which brought to the LSSAH commander the Swords to the Knight's Cross. Only days later came the news that his second son had been born.

In April 1943 Hitler decided to raise a new 1st SS Panzer Corps and to renumber the existing 1st Corps, commanded by Hausser, the 2nd. The Fuehrer empowered Dietrich to raise the new 1st Corps, and his deep involvement in that task made it impossible for him to lead the Leibstandarte when it took part in the 1943 German summer offensive, Unternehmen Zitadelle (Operation Citadel). In fact the early summer of 1943 was the last personal and close contact that Dietrich had with his old Division, but there was consolation in his promotion to Obergruppenfuehrer (general) of the SS.

At the end of October 1943, having paid a brief visit to the Eastern Front, Dietrich returned to France with the task of raising his SS Panzer Corps and training his men for the invasion they all knew was coming. The Allies landed on 6 June 1944, and Dietrich's Corps was moved to the beachhead area. Neither of its component Divisions, 1st SS nor 12th SS Panzer, was able to go into action immediately. Allied fighter-bomber attacks delayed the advance to the concentration areas, making German ground operations piecemeal and lacking in cohesion. Domination of the air was the key to the Allied victory, and any attempt by the Germans at mounting a ground offensive was hit by the 'Cab Rank' system of fighter-bomber attacks.

During the weeks of confusion which marked the course of the Normandy campaign on the German side, Dietrich spent most of his time visiting the front-line positions, encouraging and inspiring his soldiers. On 1 August he was promoted Obergruppenfuehrer (colonel general), an appointment made retrospective to April 1942, and on 3 August he received the Diamonds to the Knight's Cross. Shortly before that award was made, orders came from Fuehrer headquarters that a new offensive was to retake Avranches, where the US forces had broken out of the restricting perimeter of the beachhead and into open country. Both 12th SS and 1st SS were to be committed, although the armoured strength of the Leibstandarte had sunk to just 60 machines. The operation, known as the Mortal offensive, was perhaps the first in military history in which air power alone halted and totally destroyed an armoured offensive. When that assault was smashed, Allied efforts were then directed at the capture of the city of Falaise, and these efforts were redoubled as it became clear that German 7th Army and Panzer Group West were being trapped in the Falaise pocket. Although a great many German soldiers were killed or captured in the Falaise encirclement, sufficient numbers escaped to hold the line north of the Seine river, but Nor-

mandy had been lost. On 11 September Dietrich reported to the Fuehrer headquarters and was ordered to create an SS Army, initially titled 6th Panzer Army and then retitled the 6th SS Panzer Army during April 1945.

The headquarters of 6th Panzer Army were in Heilbronn in north-west Germany, and there, around an initial cadre of just ten officers, the constituent divisions and corps were formed. It was a difficult task, for there were two major problems: manpower shortages and fuel. The terrible casualties suffered during the five years of war had forced a reduction of the original high standards of the Leibstandarte, and for the first time some of the rank and file had had to be conscripted. The other major problem, the shortage of fuel, meant that panzer drivers received so few hours of instruction that they could neither handle their machines nor carry out tactical moves. To compound everything, there was a chronic shortage of battle tanks.

A plan which Hitler had in mind, and of which Dietrich was unaware until shortly before D-Day for the operation, foresew 6th Panzer Army spearheading an armoured thrust to capture Antwerp, supported on either flank by 5th Panzer Army and 7th Army. This offensive was to become known as the Battle of the Bulge. During the briefing conference on 23 November, attended by most of the senior commanders, Dietrich advised Hitler that he doubted whether 6th Panzer Army would be able to play its vital part in the offensive. Then, when he learned more about the operation, he was appalled. The roads allotted to his Army were narrow, un surfaced and totally unsuitable for the passage of heavy armoured vehicles, and the operation was to be made in December, when there were few hours of daylight. The fuel arrangements were ridiculous. The 6th Panzer Army's stocks were sufficient for only 200kms, and most of that stock was held in dumps located far behind the battle line. Fuel would have to be brought forward along roads which would be choked with the soft-skinned and armoured vehicles following the advance. If the 6th Panzer Army was involved in any sort of prolonged fighting, or had to carry out long diversions, the fuel tanks would run dry.

Among the units attached to 6th Panzer Army for the duration of the operation and added to bring the Army's advance forward were two specialist formations, Skorzeny's 150th Panzer Brigade and von der Heydte's 6th Fallschirmjäger regiment. The arguments between the commander of 6th Panzer Army and von der Heydte came to a head when the paratroop officer asked for carrier pigeons to carry messages because the high hills in the drop zone made it impossible to communicate using standard wireless sets. To that quite reasonable request, Dietrich, who had been drinking heavily, remarked that he was turning a panzer Army out a zox.

During a final briefing held on 12 December Dietrich repeated to Hitler that 6th Panzer Army was not ready to undertake the offensive, and his stand was supported by the other senior commanders. But it was a Fuehrer Befehl – an order which had to be obeyed. Dietrich's battle plan was for his Army to strike in

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