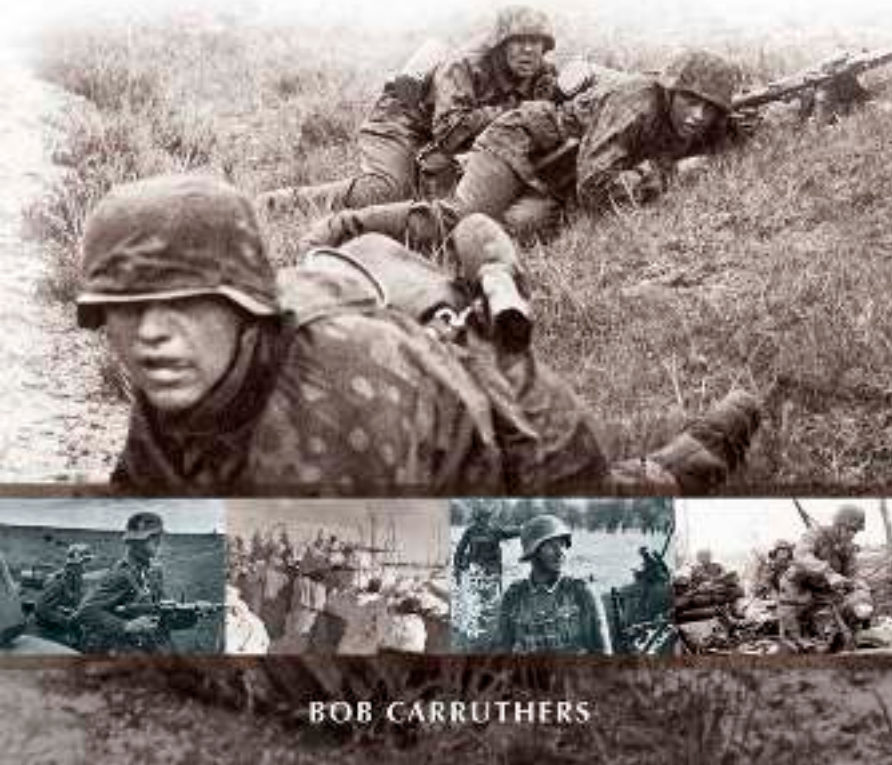

IMAGES OF WAR **THE WAFFEN-SS IN COMBAT**

RARE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM WARTIME ARCHIVES



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BOB CARRUTHERS



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MILITARY

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Chapter One

The Waffen-SS in the West 1940

The photographs appearing in the first part of this book were originally published in the spring of 1941. These images were created under the direction of *Hauptsturmführer* Gunter d'Alquen, commander of the *SS Propaganda Kompanie* and editor of the official SS paper, *Das Schwarze Korps*.

In January of 1940 an *SS-Kriegsberichter-Kompanie* (Waffen-SS war reporters company) was established, and its *züge* (platoons) were attached to the four main Waffen-SS combat formations that fought in the Western Campaign of May and June, 1940. These platoons also remained with their respective divisions for the Balkans Campaign in the spring of 1941. D'Alquen himself was a distinguished SS war reporter and served in the front lines during 1939 and 1940. In 1944 he was appointed by Himmler as head of the entire *Wehrmacht* propaganda department. Among the books he published was an official history of the SS, and a volume originally entitled '*Waffen-SS im Westen*' (1941), the photographs from Chapter I of this book appeared in that volume.

Gunter d'Alquen commanded the *SS-Kriegsberichter* unit throughout the war. By 1940 he had attained the *Allgemeine-SS* rank of *Standartenführer*, but began his Waffen-SS command in 1940 as a *Waffen-SS Hauptsturmführer der Reserve*. During the course of the war, he rose through the ranks until he became a *Waffen-SS Standartenführer der Reserve* and exercised the equivalent of regimental command. D'Alquen was responsible for a large back room staff, which processed the incoming material, as well as the front line photographers, movie cameramen, writers, broadcaster and recorders, who served in the front lines. The *Kriegsberichte* in the field were assigned to the various platoons for variable periods of service. Where possible, non-Germans served with their own national formations, but were sometimes detached to cover a particular campaign and report specifically for their own domestic press.

After the war d'Alquen found it difficult to escape his past. In July 1955 he was fined DM 60,000 by a Berlin denazification court and deprived of all civic rights for a period of three years and debarred from drawing an allowance or pension from public funds. The court found him guilty of having played an important role in the Third Reich, of war propaganda, incitement against the churches, the Jews and foreign countries, and incitement to murder. He was judged to have glorified the Waffen-SS, the Nazi State and reinforced the legend of Hitler's infallibility, he was also adjudged to bring democracy into contempt

and encouraged anti-Semitism. After a further investigation into his earnings from Nazi propaganda, d'Alquen was fined another DM 28,000 by the Berlin denazification court on 7 January, 1958. He died in 1998.

Many of the photographs featured here feature the men of Waffen-SS *Standarte Germania*. In 1940 the men who bore the word *Germania* on their cuff bands were fighting as a motorised regiment under the command of *SS-Standartenführer* Karl-Maria Demelhuber.

Originally *Germania* was formed in August 1934, as *SS-Standarte III*. It was soon renamed *SS-Standarte II* when Hitler ordered that *SS-Leibstandarte* Adolf Hitler would not be included in the SS numbering sequence. At the 1936 Nürnberg Rally, *SS-Standarte II* was officially granted the honour title *Germania* where it received the unit colours and authority to wear the cuff band bearing the unit title. It subsequently took a part in the annexation of Austria and was responsible for security during the Italian leader Benito Mussolini's visit to Germany. *Germania* also took part in the annexation of Sudetenland. It later served as a guard regiment in Prague, as *Wach-Regiment des Reichsprotektors von Böhmen und Mähren*, until July 1939.

In August 1939 Adolf Hitler, in preparation for *Fall Weiss*, placed the SS-VT under the operational command of the OKW. At the outbreak of hostilities in Poland, there were four SS armed regiments in existence *Leibstandarte*, *Deutschland*, *Germania* and the new regiment from Austria named *Der Führer*, however *Der Führer* was not yet combat-ready and played no part in the Polish campaign. Events during the Invasion of Poland raised a political furore with OKW expressing doubts over the combat effectiveness of the SS-VT. Their courage and willingness to fight was never in any doubt; but at times they were almost too eager for action and this naïve enthusiasm led to disproportionately high casualties. The OKW reported that the SS-VT had unnecessarily exposed themselves to risks and acted recklessly, incurring far heavier losses than Army troops and endangering the achievement of operational mission objectives as a result. It was also strongly argued by OKW that the SS-VT was poorly trained and many of its officers were unsuitable for command. In retaliation the SS-VT argued strongly that it had been mishandled and was hampered by its deployment as sub-units intermixed with regular *Wehrmacht* forces. Himmler took issue with the fact that SS-VT units were fighting piecemeal with the mixed *Wehrmacht* / SS Panzer Division *Kempf* instead of as one SS-VT formation. The SS-VT he argued was also improperly equipped to carry out some of the tasks, which had been allocated of it.

As a result of the controversy Heinrich Himmler, as always, sought to achieve a political end and insisted that, in future, the SS-VT should be allowed to fight only in the form of its own discrete formations, under its own commanders and high command. The OKW reacted strongly to this nonsensical suggestion and in response mounted an attempt to have the SS-VT disbanded altogether. Hitler was unwilling to consider this, but neither did he wish to upset the Army and he chose a conciliatory path. Hitler ordered that for the campaign in the West the SS-VT should form its own self-contained

Division, but this Division and all subsequent Waffen-SS divisions would still come under Army command.

Accordingly in October 1939, the *Deutschland*, *Germania*, *Der Führer* and various support units including artillery and reconnaissance battalions were reorganised into the SS-Verfügungs Division (SS-VT). Initially the men of SS *Leibstandarte* were earmarked to form part of the formation but the decision was rescinded and SS *Leibstandarte* did not fight alongside the other units. The SS-Verfügungs Division which took part in *Fall Gelb* came under the command of *Generalleutnant der Waffen-SS* Paul 'Papa' Hausser and took part in the Campaigns in the West against the Low Countries and France in 1940. This time round the SS-VT distinguished itself in combat and was to win praise from OKW. The SS reconnaissance battalion played a distinguished role in the campaign and many of the photographs in this book feature that formation.

The SS-VT first saw action in the main drive for the Dutch central front and Rotterdam and many of those images are presented in this book. After Rotterdam had been captured, the Division, along with other divisions, intercepted a French force and forced them back to the area of Zeeland and Antwerp. The SS-VT were next used to mop-up small pockets of resistance in the areas already captured by the German advance. The Division was then transferred to France. Despite Hitler's express orders to halt, Sepp Deitrich ordered an advance by his SS *Leibstandarte* which breached the strongly defended La Bassée canal line, but at a high cost in Waffen-SS casualties. Meanwhile the SS-VT Division finally participated in the drive on Paris. At the end of the campaign, it had advanced all the way to the Spanish Frontier.

The SS-Verfügungs Division was later to gain far greater fame when it was re-named as the Waffen-SS Division *Das Reich*. However SS *Germania* had no role to play in that particular formation. The victorious campaign in the West had proved the fighting reputation of the Waffen-SS, and in the process had also opened new and fertile recruiting grounds among the populations of the conquered territories many of whom were sympathetic to the aims of National Socialism. The low countries in particular were to prove a very strong recruiting ground for the Waffen-SS. Initially there were so many volunteers that a new regiment, *Westland*, was quickly formed and its ranks almost immediately filled by Dutch and Belgian volunteers. This was followed by a sister regiment, known as *Nordland*, which was formed from the ranks of Norwegian and Danish volunteers.

Soon after the French campaign, *Germania* was detached from the SS-VT Division and combined with these two new foreign formations, to form the new 5th SS Division comprised of *Westland*, *Nordland* and *Germania*. The division was originally entitled *Germania* but in order to better reflect its origins it was soon redesignated as the 5th SS Division *Wiking* and was destined to become one of the most controversial fighting formations of the war.



The SS *Aufklärungsabteilung* (Reconnaissance Battalion) was a key component of the SS-VT Division structure, playing a vital part in the French campaign. One of the chief tasks allocated to this fast moving and highly mobile force was to maintain contact with retreating enemy forces.





The BMW R75 was the powerful and highly reliable motorcycle, which equipped the *Aufklärungsabteilung*. The addition of the sidecar meant that three men could be transported on each machine, which gave the unit the advantage of mobility with added firepower.



In May 1940 the SS-VT was on alert for the commencement of *Fall Gelb* (Operation Yellow), which would signal a pre-emptive invasion of the Netherlands and Belgium. The SS Reconnaissance Battalion and the *Der Führer* Regiment received their movement orders first and on 9 May were detached from the SS-VT Division and moved near the Dutch border, with the remainder of the division remaining behind the lines in Munster.



In the first campaign of the war the SS-VT was equipped with the highly effective MG 34. It could be operated as a light machine gun using its integral bipod stand, which was mounted underneath the barrel, or turned into a heavy machine gun by the simple expedient of mounting the gun on a tripod. However, the MG 34 in combat conditions proved to be somewhat over engineered which rendered the MG 34 vulnerable to stoppage at crucial moments. The practical rate of fire in light machine gun mode was around 100-200 rounds per minute. Tripod mounted in heavy machine gun mode the effective rate of fire was 300 rounds per minute. The effective range in light machine gun mode was 600-800 yards, rising to 2,000-2,500 yards in heavy machine gun mode.

Elements of the SS-VT Division first saw action in Holland at 5:35 a.m. on 10 May 1940 when *Der Führer* and the *SS Aufklärungsabteilung* captured Arnhem and advanced towards Utrecht. The reconnaissance battalion had been split into five groups consisting of a motorcycle platoon and two armoured cars each and tasked with capturing an intact bridge over the Maas-Waal canal.





Assault Teams One and Three failed to achieve their objectives and Team One sustained heavy casualties after the bridge at Neerbosch was blown by retreating Dutch forces. However assault teams Two and Four succeeded in securing crossing points at Hatert and Heumen respectively.



The following day, the remainder of the SS-VT Division in three March columns crossed into Holland ordered to penetrate the Grebbe defence line then spearhead the thrust towards Rotterdam. Dutch resistance was expected to be protracted making the assault a costly prospect, however *Der Führer* regiment attacked the heavily defended Grebbe mountain position after a heavy artillery bombardment and captured their objective by 1900 hrs on 12 May 1940.



The fighting in Holland is often viewed as being one sided and half hearted from the point of view of the Dutch forces. However, the *Der Führer* regiment in particular suffered very heavy casualties in the first few days amounting to over four hundred with one hundred and twenty killed and two hundred and fifty wounded by 12 May.

For the Holland campaign, the SS *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*, had been incorporated into the Army's 27th Infantry Division and on 10 May spearheaded the northern flank German advance. The SS *Totenkopf* and SS *Polizei* Divisions were held in reserve. After the surrender of Rotterdam, the *Leibstandarte* set out to capture The Hague, which they achieved on 15 May, capturing 3,500 Dutch prisoners of war.





Fighting in an urban landscape was particularly stressful and costly. The buildings damaged or otherwise afforded the defender the advantage. With the upper storeys of buildings available to snipers and machine gunners the attacking Waffen-SS had to think in three-dimensions and consequently expend greater amounts of ammunition and manpower in urban battles.





The tactical unit of the Waffen-SS was the ten-man squad, which comprised a squad leader and his deputy, a four-man rifle group and a machine gun group. The four-man machine gun group operated two MG 34s and provided the bulk of the squad's firepower both in offence and defence. The squad generally employed the machine gun elements to provide suppressive fire while the rifle element advanced to neutralise the enemy with grenades and rifle fire. The most common role of the rifle group was therefore to support and protect the machine gun group. The rifle element also functioned as an assault group on the attack where they were charged with taking and holding ground.



On 14 May the SS-VT Division found itself pitched against French forces for the first time. The *Panzerjäger* detachment of SS *Deutschland* soon distinguished itself knocking out five Renault tanks and a number of armoured cars.

Dutch resistance lasted until 15 May but French forces and English forces continued to resist the German forces in Holland and Northern Belgium. The SS-VT was involved in heavy fighting against French forces around Achterbroek. Fighting continued on Walcheren Island until 18 May.





On 21 May elements of the SS-VT Division were involved in the Battle of Arras against the British 5th Division, which attacked the German invaders with a strong force including around seventy tanks. It was a close run thing and the SS-VT Division suffered twenty dead and thirty wounded in the course of the morning.



On 24 May British forces attacked Saint Venant, forcing the SS-VT Division to retreat. This was a significant event as it marked the first time any SS unit had been forced to withdraw and surrender ground that it had captured to the enemy. However, the advance was soon resumed and on 27 May *Deutschland* reached a river line at Merville.



On 27 May elements of the SS-VT formed a bridgehead across the river and waited for the detached *Panzerjager* platoon SS *Totenkopf* Division to arrive and provide support and cover their exposed flank. However, the men of the *Deutschland* regiment were surprised by a unit of British tanks unexpectedly advanced on their positions. The SS-VT just managed to hold out against the British tank force, which penetrated to within fifteen feet of German positions. The day was rescued by the arrival of the *Totenkopf Panzerjager* platoon, which saved the *Deutschland* from what seemed like certain destruction.



On the night of 23 May the SS-VT had to contend with a strong breakthrough by a large French force supported by tanks. In a fierce night battle three French tanks were knocked out in the streets of the town by members of the *Germania* motorcycle infantry company.





During the closing battles with the British expeditionary force, the SS-VT enjoyed the welcome support of the 8th Panzer Division which fought on the left flank of SS *Der Führer* and was much needed given the large armoured contingents available to the French and British forces.

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