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Main-Topic: Comparison between the Infantry Battalion and the Assault Battalion, developed by the Waffen-SS during the Course of the War.

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Comparison between the Infantry Battalion and the Assault Battalion
developed by the Waffen-SS during the course of the war.

Even though the increased employment of equipment and technical innovations exerts considerable influence upon the method of combat from a technical angle, nevertheless, in modern combat waged against a modern enemy there are tasks which cannot be accomplished solely by the use of these technical innovations, and thus commitment of infantry units is still necessary. Because of the enemy's increased armament, an attack predominantly carried out by infantry has become an ever expanding problem.

This problem had to be faced as early as World War I. Massed artillery fire and the increased number of light and heavy machine guns necessitated the application of greatest deployment in infantry tactics and the creation of the concept of the individual infantry soldier. However, as losses increased and the efficiency of the hastily trained individual soldier steadily declined during the course of the war, the problem remained unsolved.

These experiences, obtained from the battles of World War I, determined the peace-time development of the German Infantry. The infantry of the German army at the outbreak of World War II consisted of drafted enlisted personnel of varying physical quality. Their training was based on the closest coordination of light and heavy infantry weapons. The infantry was thoroughly trained in combat employing combined arms. Infantry training was based on the rule 'two on line - one in reserve'. For example, in an attack a battalion as a rule employed two of its three companies; the company generally committed two of its three platoons and the platoon two

of its three squads. The combat formations were deployed in width and depth, and the coordination of heavy and light infantry weapons for the support of the infantry had been carefully planned and practiced in training. As a result of this thorough peace-time training, offensive combat by the German Infantry in 1940-41 proved equal to enemy's defensive combat and led to success. However, this method of attack had the following disadvantages which would have had detrimental results because of mounting losses and the necessarily brief training of replacements:

a. Attacks were carried out over broad frontages and after achieving a penetration in the enemy's main line of resistance, the available forces had to be regrouped. In this way, valuable time for subsequent action was lost and the enemy had time to reassemble.

b. Due to wide frontages the available heavy infantry weapons were not able to give adequate support to the attacking infantry.

c. When zones of attack were assigned to attacking infantry units, the attack, often of necessity, ^{was} carried across open and unfavorable terrain.

d. Exercise of firm command over the individual soldier within the framework of his combat unit -- squad, platoon, etc. -- which is especially important in the case of poorly trained replacements was not assured since even the squad leader was not able to exert a personal influence over his combat unit,

One logical result was that, in part, considerable losses were incurred, and the offensive capability of units was lowered.

[2] Because of these factors, the difficulties of command are increased and mobility and striking power are affected. Aside from the resulting

large losses in equipment - which are not always easily replaced - certainly the fact that increased losses exert an unfavorable effect upon the morale of the troops and thus greatly reduce fighting power, had to be taken into account.

These facts were clearly recognized by the Waffen-SS from the very beginning, and its aim was to strive at all times to take counter-measures against these conditions. Consequently, from the time it was activated, the Waffen-SS placed great emphasis on a combat method which to a very great extent would off-set these disadvantages. It is obvious that intensive training could only be carried out with specially selected units. Therefore, those chosen for the Waffen-SS were of high physical caliber and exceptional mental capacity. This principle of selection proved to be most successful and no doubt will always be adhered to in the organization of Elite-troops.

During its training, therefore, the Waffen-SS could take into account that it had the 'cream' of personnel, that much greater reliance could be placed on its units, and substantially more would be expected from its infantry in ground combat. Thus the idea came into existence in the Waffen-SS to intensify infantry combat training and develop a special assault infantry from Waffen-SS units. Thus, creation of assault detachments became the predominant idea in infantry training. These detachments formed a small separate combat unit and their weapons were in conformance with the special nature of their tasks. Even the smallest unit, the assault squad, had flat trajectory fire and high-angle fire weapons at its disposal. The assault squad was equipped with assault rifles [Sturmgewehren]*, rifles equipped

*Editor's note: The author may mean the machine pistols.

with telescopic sights, light machine guns, rifle grenade attachments, and hand grenades. Later on, recoilless antitank grenades and launchers, [Panzerfaust], were added. Mortars as powerful high-angle weapons were available in the next larger unit, the assault platoon. The assault company also had heavy machine guns, mortars, frequently 2 cm. cannon, antitank rifles, and combat engineers equipped with demolition equipment and mines.

The distinctive feature of the method of combat employed by such a unit consisted of the fact that assault detachments or assault squads received their own combat missions which they carried out, in so far as possible, in close combat in parallel commitment, leaving certain gaps and exploiting the terrain features.

The advantages of this method of combat are obvious:

a. The commanders down to assault detachment leaders no longer are restricted to the framework of a definite pattern. The commander has closer control of his unit and is able to operate in a more advantageous and successful manner.

b. By abolishing the zone of attack, unfavorable terrain would be by-passed in an attack. The enemy would not recognize the attack immediately. The attacking force - which is hardly in evidence on the battlefield, and thus presents not much of a target - will avoid unnecessary casualties. The by-passed areas were neutralized exclusively by heavy weapons and covered by scattered reconnaissance patrols who, by delivering heavy fire, feigned a strong infantry attack. Naturally, feint attacks were conducted by the assault battalion for purposes of deceiving the enemy regarding the actual attack.

[3]

c. Since the attack is organized in depth and launched along a narrow front, full support by the massed fire of heavy infantry weapons is possible. Moreover this disposition in depth prevents the enemy from delivering an effective thrust against the flank of the attacking assault units.

d. The assault unit, thus, attacks on a narrow front, but with full striking force and by utilizing all of its fire power. The leading assault unit is not charged with the mission of rolling up the enemy's line and therefore no reorganization will be necessary after the penetration has been achieved. The advantage gained may be increased by immediate exploitation of the new situation.

e. Well-trained and smoothly-functioning assault units generally did not launch their attacks at the customary hour. Daytime hours were no longer chosen for the beginning of an attack. Instead they chose the hours during twilight and dawn -- a time when the enemy usually did not expect an attack. Still more successful were attacks at night or during fog.

Thorough training of personnel both as to physical fitness and tactics and technique of fire were the prerequisites for moulding this type of combat unit. In addition, various minor tasks calling for decisions were assigned so as to school personnel to properly evaluate situations and to react instantly. Beyond this, N.C.O.'s and commanders of these units had to be thoroughly trained in tactics which their size unit might have to employ.

It has not been the purpose of this report to present at this time a detailed study of the training of these assault units. It must be

understood that this Waffen-SS combat method could not be applied throughout because the time required to master a task of this nature was not available. At any rate those experiences gained throughout the whole war in the Regiment "Deutschland" of the Division "Wiking" were entirely sufficient to demonstrate the practicability of this method of combat. These battalions nearly always achieved success in combat while losses were held to a moderate figure.

G L O S S A R Y

- ARMEEABTEILUNG - A reinforced corps, commanded by a Corps commander with a Corps Staff.
- ARMEEGRUPPE - A weak improvised army under an Army Commander with an improvised Army Staff.
- DIVISIONSGRUPPE- A unit formed by transferring the designation of a partially destroyed division to one of or a consolidation of its regiments.
- GAU - Nazi Party administrative area.
- GAULEITER - Official in charge of a Nazi Party administrative area (Gau). His control over party matters in his area was complete, and gradually after 1933, and even more after 1939, he assumed complete control over the entire civilian population.
- JAEGER (division or other size unit) light infantry
- KAMPFGRUPPE - A term loosely assigned to improvised combat units of various sizes, named usually after their commanders.
- KORPSABTEILUNG - A reinforced division commanded by a (usually senior) Division Commander, with a Division Staff.
- KORPSGRUPPE - Two or three understrength divisions assembled into a tactical unit under a Corps Commander, with an improvised Corps Staff.
- LUFTGAU - Administrative and supply organization of the German Air Force; its authority was limited to a well defined and permanently fixed geographical area. Those established in Germany were designated by Roman numerals, those in occupied areas by their location.
- ORGANIZATION TODT - Paramilitary construction organization of the Nazi Party, auxiliary to the Wehrmacht. Named after its founder, Dr. Todt. Consisted of a cadre of engineers, expanded as necessary by the use of hired, conscript, or foreign labor.
- PANZERFAUST - Recoilless anti-tank grenade and launcher, both expendable.
- PANZERGRENADIER (division or other size unit)- usually motorized, occasionally mechanized infantry.
- PANZERGRUPPE - Armored force the size of an army, but operating in conjunction with an army. (When operating independently, normally redesignated as a Panzer Army.)

(OVER)

- REGIMENTSGRUPPE - a. A regiment constituted during operations and consisting of men and equipment from various arms.
(or)
b. A reinforced battalion, given a regimental designation.
- REICHSWEHR - The German National Defense Establishment under the Versailles Treaty.
- ROLLBAHN - Road designated as a main axis of motorized transportation, from which all animal transport and marching columns were normally barred.
- VOLKSGRENADIER - A term first applied in autumn 1944, to reorganized infantry divisions, organized on reduced T/O with increased ratio of automatic weapons.
- VOLKSSTURM - Peoples' militia, assembled during the later years of the war, resembling somewhat the wartime State Guard in the U.S.
- WAFFEN SS - Combat arm of the SS; in effect a partial duplication of the German Army.
- WEHRKREIS - The basic military area of Germany, resembling somewhat the pre-war U.S. Corps Area; had the additional functions of administering conscription and furnishing replacements to specific units (divisions and corps) whose home station was located in the Wehrkreis.