

1st Artillery Battery/SS Volunteer Legion "Niederlande" 1942

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In early January 1942, SS Legion "Niederlande," composed of Dutch volunteers, was sent by rail from its garrison in Krakow, Poland, to the Baltic port of Danzig. From there it was shipped by sea to Libau, Latvia, – the first waystation en route to the Eastern Front. The Legion marched by foot and truck from Riga to Pleaskau and then on to the threatened Volkhov River Front. On 15 January 1942, the Dutch SS troops moved into frontline positions and were almost immediately engaged in combat.

To provide heavy weapons support to the Legion, the 1st Field Howitzer Battery of the SS-Polizei Artillery Regiment/ SS-Police (Police) Division, was attached to I. Battalion/"Niederlande." The police artillerymen were also supposed to compensate for the loss of the heavy weapons companies of the SS Volunteer Legion "Flandern," which had been transferred to another area. The commander of I./"Niederlande" was SS- Hauptsturmführer (Captain) Frank, while the commander of the 1st Artillery Battery was Hauptmann (Captain) Vogel, (SS police troops did not yet use SS ranks).

From 28 to 31 January 1942, the Soviets carried out continuous violent assaults on the Legion "Niederlande" sector, forcing the Legion Commander to pull his troops back into a "fish hook" defensive line that faced north-northwest from Kelieschi to Pjatilipi, east-northeast from Pjatilipi to Gusi and from Gusi to Selogora-Gorenka. All tolled, the Legion front stretched for 17 bending and twisting kilometers. On 30 January, 1st Artillery Battery took up firing positions in Gusi, which was in the exact center of the "Niederlande" lines and constituted part of a "finger" that extended into enemy held territory.

Savage fighting went on in this sector through the first part of February, with the enemy exerting terrific pressure against the Dutch/German defenders. 1st Artillery Battery was divided into two segments that were deployed respectively in the twin sub-villages of Gusi-A and Gusi-B. On 31 January 1942, the communists broke through the Dutch lines east of Gusi and directly attacked the positions of the artillery battery. It was a grim situation; the gunners were forced to fire directly into the southeast portion of Gusi proper where some elements of the Legion were still holding out. To the south of Gusi, the Dutch defenders regrouped and hurriedly rebuilt a defensive line that ran long the edge of a forest. In sum total, there was the equivalent of about one company of soldiers in this area.

Leutnant (Lieutenant) Glaser was the officer credited with successfully blocking off a major enemy penetration; he directed the overall activities of the artillery battery while Oberwachtmeister (Sergeant) Riese worked ceaselessly to improve the individual firing positions of the field pieces. So intense and dangerous was the action, that the various gun crews were frequently cutoff and had to keep firing on their own initiative. Communication between the different gun positions became impossible. As losses accumulated, the officers and senior NCO's were pressed into duty as gun handlers. Thanks to the accurate shooting of 1st Battery and the valor of the Dutch volunteers, Gusi held, but at a great price in killed and wounded. The German and Dutch dead were buried together in the Selo Gora cemetery. The main enemy achievement in the battle had been to sever part of the main road to Selo Gora. This caused the Legion "Niederlande" some difficulty in the weeks to come.

By mid-February, the troops in Gusi, including the artillerymen, were isolated from the main supply centers to the south. Supplies could only be brought in via a footpath through the high snow banks from Radoni. A "knap sack" column was organized for this purpose. Because of this situation, little in the way of howitzer ammunition could be brought up and the field pieces had to be fired sparingly. Throughout the rest of the month and for most of March the artillerymen were therefore most often used as infantry.

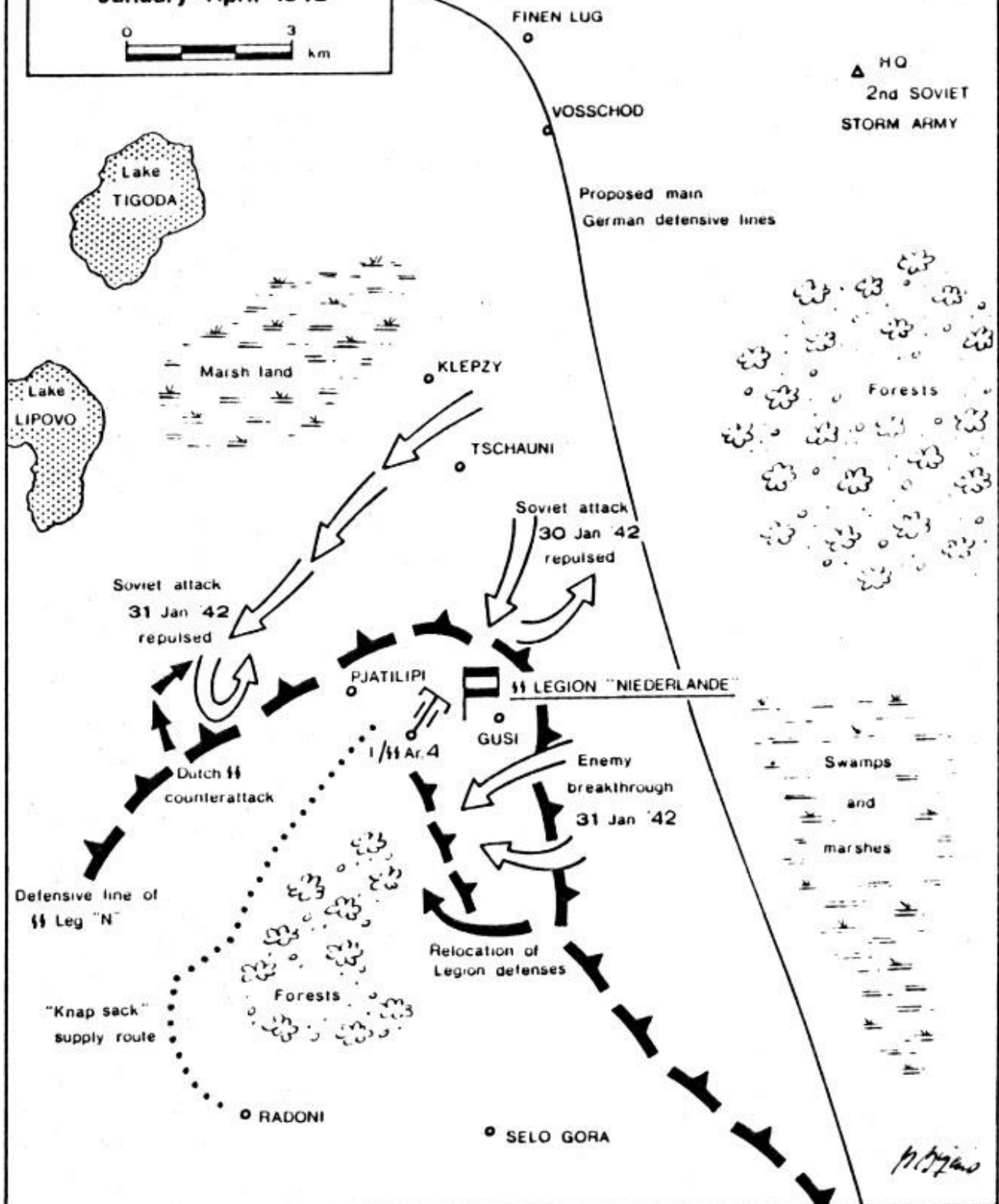
In March, a Soviet advance troop almost reached a forward observation post near Pjatilipy. Inside the post, the two "spotters," Oberwachmeisters Eisenbarth and Roemhild, called for fire on their position. After the German artillery barrage ended the Reds were found to have vanished leaving their dead scattered all around the outpost. At a later date, in late 1943 and early 1944, Roemhild would return to the same spot as an officer and battery commander in the 2nd Latvian SS Brigade. He would be jointed by Oberleutnant Lutze, adjutant of I. Detachment/SS Art.Rgt. 4, who also served with 1st Battery on the Volkhov Front. Since the SS Polizie Art.Rgt. 4 provided the formation nucleus for the Latvian SS Art.Rgt. 19, many of 1st Battery's troopers would be back with the Latvians at the same locations where in the spring of 1942 they served with the Dutch SS men.

During a cold night in early April 1942, two Soviet platoons broke into Gusi, but with the close support of 1st Battery, the Dutch soldiers were able to totally destroy the enemy elements. Additional assistance was provided by a platoon from the Army Engineer Company 665 led by Feldwebel (Sergeant) Walter Plaumann, which helped build more fortifications at Gusi and Pjatilipy. During this whole period of ceaseless, difficult fighting, the comradeship between the Dutch and German soldiers was cemented forever in the hardships of the frontlines.

Positions of
LEGION "NIEDERLANDE"
 at Gusi-Gora

January - April 1942

0 3 km



From Good Friday until Easter Sunday 1942, extremely vicious combat took place around Gusi and Pjatilipi. Once again, Hstuf. Frank's I./"Niederlande" proved its mettle in blood. Sacrificing itself completely, the battalion was reduced to the size of a platoon, but the communists had not gained an inch of ground. On 10 April 1942, 1. Battalion was withdrawn from the front to join the other parts of Legion "Niederlande" in Poland for rest and refitting. Of the more than 2500 Dutch SS volunteers who had gone into action in January, only about 200 were left! Fully 90% of the unit's personnel had become casualties and the Dutch left behind them many comrades at the Hero's Cemetery in Selo Gora. But they had won for themselves a brilliant reputation, which was first really brought to the world's attention on 4 March 1942, when German radio broadcasted the following Wehrmacht communique: "...north of Lake Ilmen, the Netherlande Legion has particularly distinguished itself." This was an extraordinary tribute for a foreign volunteer detachment to receive!

The extreme violence of the Eastern fighting was best demonstrated by the fact that the town of Gusi had changed hands several times, though ultimately ending up in Dutch control. Even after Legion "Niederlande" left the front, 1st Battery stayed in position alongside an Army replacement unit. Towards the end of April 1942, the SS Police Battery was itself replaced by an Army artillery battery, and it was transported by rail to the "ring around Leningrad."

Instead of rejoining I./SS Art.Rgt. 4 (its parent unit), 1st Battery was sent to firing positions south of Pulkovo and came under the control of the SS-Kampfgruppe "Jeckeln" which was headquartered at Urizk. This battle-group – a first rate formation – was led by the hard-driving Higher SS and Police Leader for the Baltic area, SS-Gruppenführer (Lt. Gen.) Frederic Jackeln. 1st Battery was put in place before the town of Urizk, with its observation post situated in a railroad factory building. This was such a slow sector, that the battery war diary for the dates 19 to 24 April 1942, noted that "nothing special had occurred."

At mid-night on 25 April, SS-KGr. "Jeckeln" relocated to the Oranienbaum coastal sector west of Leningrad and for one week, 1st Battery was attached to the SS Volunteer Legion "Norwegen." When "Norwegen" left for refitting in Poland in early May, the battery served briefly with IIL/Infantry Rgt. 538 and then with II./Infantry Rgt. 538, before returning to the old lines of SS Polizei Regiment 1 near Pulkovo on 26 May 1942. It had had seen little or no action on the Leningrad Front. Once returned to the "community" of the SS Police Division, 1st Battery's again served alongside the other batteries of I./SS Polizei Art.Rgt. 4. At this time, in recognition of 1st Battery's achievements at Gusi, many members were awarded both classes of the Iron Cross along with the infantry assault badge. The battery commander, Hauptmann Vogel, received the coveted German Cross in Gold. One valuable element of the battery – the draft horses that pulled the guns – had survived the difficult weather and combat conditions in good shape thanks to the careful ministrations of Dr. Hartmann, the

battery veterinarian. In June 1942, many members of the battery received their first home leaves since having arrived on the Eastern Front the previous summer.

By early June 1942, SS Legion "Niederlande" was back in its old sector, its strength having been increased to nearly 3,000 men through the addition of new recruits and recovered wounded. Commencing on 15 June 1942, the Legion took part in the great battle for the Volkhov Pocket. In the course of this fighting, the Dutch SS men again distinguished themselves by capturing 66 enemy field pieces, 3,500 Red Army soldiers and even the commander of the 2nd Soviet Storm Army himself. For its superlative performance, the Legion received yet another mention in the Wehrmacht War Bulletin.