

## *SS Inf. Rgt. 4 on the Eastern Front in the Winter of 1941-42*

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### **Emergency Airlift to the 4th Army**

**A**fter having spent more than two months in action on the Eastern Front, the SS Inf. Rgt. 4 was pulled out of the lines in November 1941 for a leisurely program of refitting. In March 1942 it was supposed to join the SS Div. “Das Reich,” which had lost most of its SS Inf. Rgt. 11 in heavy fighting on the road to Moscow. SS IR 4 was replaced as a component of the 2nd SS Inf. Bde. by the newly formed SS Volunteer Legion “Flandern,” composed of Flemish volunteers.

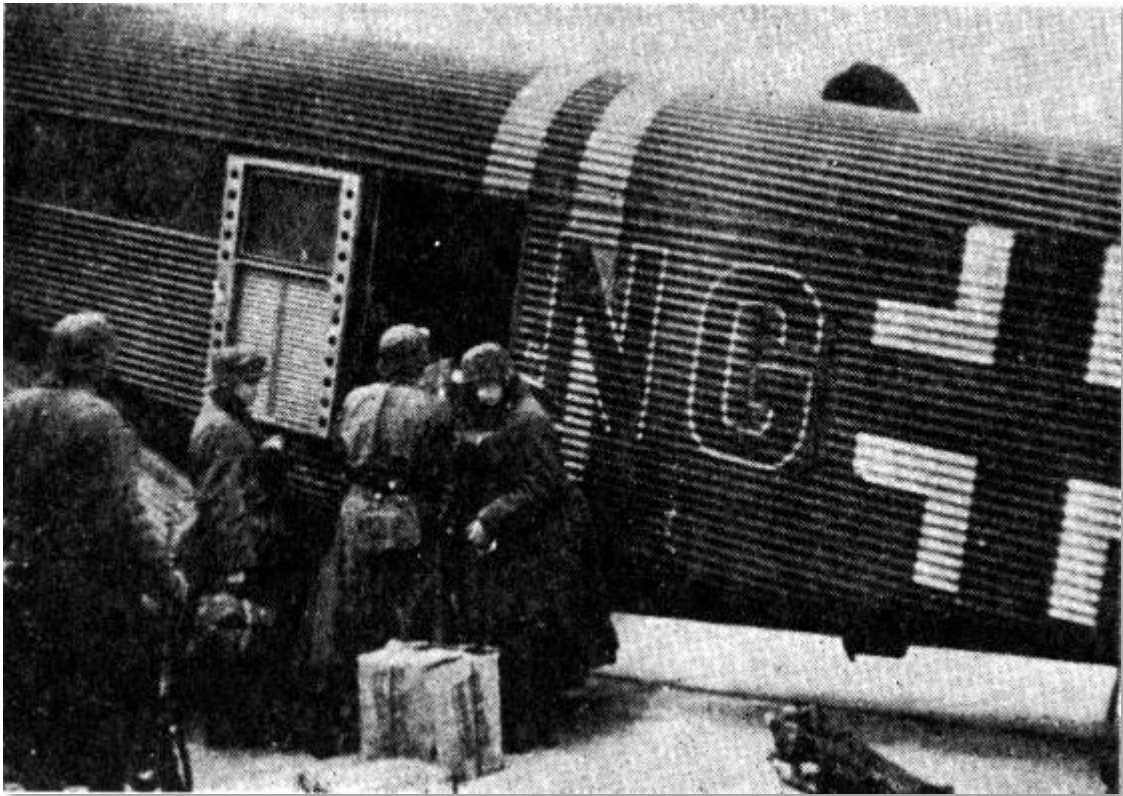
On 26 November 1941, the regiment began its relocation to Poland. The three regimental battalions would leave the Leningrad sector in march columns staggered a day apart on 26, 27 and 28 November respectively. In great cold and biting winds, the truck convoys made their way through a bleak, snow-covered land. The soldiers had thickly insulated their troop trucks with straw to provide some protection against the cold. The three regimental march groups passed through Pleskau, Riga, Mitau, Bischofsburg, Zichenaw and Warsaw and reached their destination at Krakow on 5, 6 and 7 December.

I. and III. Battalions were quartered in the Polish Army barracks in the “Old Town” while II. Btl. was sent to the SS- “Totenkopf” guard barracks in Krakow. The regiment was now supposed to be rebuilt into a motorized “schnell” rifle regiment, so it could be added to the “Das Reich” Division. After a short rest period, the unit’s vehicles, equipment and weapons were overhauled. Maintenance work went on at a feverish pace, and the so-called “refreshing” the regiment was supposed to be enjoying became one in name only.

SS-IR 4, which had gone into action near Leningrad armed with Czech weapons, was now resupplied with German machine guns (MG34s) and rifles. Some new replacements also arrived and a weapons training program soon got underway. The “old warriors” from the Leningrad fighting taught the new young soldiers all the tricks and shortcuts they had picked up in action. By working closely together, the old and new members of the regiment rapidly gained a firm sense of community and comradeship.

With Christmas fast approaching, half of the “veterans” with the regiment were slated to go on home leave, but developments in the “East” looked ominous. The Soviets had launched a dangerous counteroffensive before Moscow and the German

lines were threatened up and down the front. The men of SS-IR 4 soon got the bad news: "All leaves are cancelled!" To say the least, this put a quick damper on the Christmas spirit. As an added precaution the whole regiment was put on readiness alert. This meant that the unit could be sent back to the front at any moment, and those orders were not long in coming:



**Members of the Regiment prepare to board a Ju 52 in Krakow.**

"The SS-IR 4 is to be flown to the area of Army Group Center. Infantry weapons will accompany. Heavy weapons will follow in an overland truck convoy. Each man will take only his personal weapons and equipment and only the most essential items in his clothing bag."

The companies immediately sprang to life; officers and NCOs shouted out commands and directions. In very short order weapons were distributed, clothing bags packed and last letters to home were written. On the next day they would move out. Men that had just started out on leave returned and the last replacements came in. Each man in the regiment was issued with a new winter overcoat. By 16 December 1941, SS-IR 4 was ready to go.

The regimental units were scheduled in sequence for the transport flights. I. Btl. was to be the first to leave. On 18 December, its companies were trucked to the Krakow airfield where Ju 52 transport planes were waiting for them. But the weather proved to be too unsettled to permit a takeoff and the men of I. Btl. had to be hauled back to

their barracks. The next day calm weather prevailed and they were loaded into the aircraft.

On 19 December, 1st Co./SS-IR 4 under Hstuf. von Rautenfeld was the first element of the regiment to begin its flight to the east. The pilots carefully supervised the loading of the men and their equipment since too much weight aboard created additional hazards. Each Ju 52 could hold only 20 soldiers and their accessories; therefore, it took 10 planes to carry a full strength 200-man company. Because of their weaponry, the machine gun companies took up fully 15 airplanes each.

Sturmbannführer Vitzthum, the battalion CO, along with the rest of his staff, left Krakow by air on the morning of 20 December. It would still take two more days to get the rest of the battalion in flight. The planes had to fly at particularly high altitudes to avoid contact with any enemy fighters. Far below stretched what seemed to be an endless panorama of frozen white earth.

1st Co./SS-IR 4 was the first to disembark at the Malojaroslavice airfield near the Juchnov-Moscow road, but it was not until the evening of 22 December that it could be reassembled with the other battalion companies along with 12./III. Btl. (machine guns). The 4th Co. was the last battalion unit to arrive at Malojaroslavice during the late afternoon of 22 December. It was just in time to come under mortar fire from nearby Soviet advance spearheads. Parts of 2nd and 4th Companies were sent off slogging through the snow to engage the enemy.

Machine guns were immediately put into position in the woods next to the airfield and an enemy attack group was driven off. It was quite a warm welcome for the newly arrived SS troops! The entire battalion was now readied for action. It was apparent that the Reds had broken through along both sides of the main Juchnov road. Stubaf. Vitzthum split his command into three segments, each of which was to join with Army units to help stem the enemy advance.

After dropping the troops off, the Ju 52s immediately refueled and left the threatened airfield. The soldiers were able to get a quick meal from a field kitchen and then they were rushed off to their new assignments. 1st Company drew the first mission; it was to be sent to reinforce part of the 260th Inf. Div. in the front lines. Hstuf. Rautenfeld and his platoon leaders supervised the loading of the SS men and equipment into a truck convoy which quickly left for the front.



**SS IR 4 troops before the counterattack on Kolodkino, north of Juchnov.**

Because of the enemy ground fire nearby, the Malojaroslavice airfield had to cease operating during the evening of 22 December. The rest of SS-IR 4 now had to be sent to other destinations. III. Battalion and the regimental staff were rerouted to Kaluga, and the various units arrived there between 22 and 24 December. The regimental CO, Ostuf. Hinrich Schuldt and his adjutant, Hstuf. Molderings, established a command post in a small building on the edge of the city and they immediately began laying out situation maps to try and figure out where the various companies of I. Btl. had been sent. The first incoming news received at the HQ was a report that Hstuf. Heinz Herdt, the commander of 3rd Co., had already been killed in action.

II./SS-IR 4, which had been scheduled to leave Krakow on 24 December, received a two-day delay due to foul weather conditions, and did not get underway until 26 December. 5th, 6th and 7th Companies along with the battalion staff and parts of 13th, 14th and 16th Cos. landed at the Juchnov airfield, south of Orscha, on 27 and 28 December. During those two days the military situation around Juchnov deteriorated rapidly. Soviet assault troops had broken through to the south of Kaluga and to the north of Suchnitschi. In the process they managed to reach the Juchnov-Roslavl road and penetrated deeply into the interior sectors of 4th Army.

II./SS-IR 4, under the command of Hstuf. Walter Harzer, was given the difficult mission of securing and defending the area around Naro-Fominsk to the south of Juchnov, while at the same time preserving the vital supply road running to 19th Pz. Div., which was fighting for its existence against strong communist forces. The 13th,



14th and 16th Cos., which were part of the heavy weapons elements of the regiment, were ordered to proceed to the front with II. Battalion. Surprisingly, the light antitank and infantry guns assigned to these companies were also airlifted in instead of being shipped up in a transport column as previously planned. This additional firepower made II. Btl. a very welcome reinforcement to 19th Pz. Division.

During the time period from 19 December to 28 December 1941, the Special Air Transport Sqn. 600 under Maj. Zeidler did a masterful job of flying the 2,200 soldiers of SS-IR 4 with their weapons, supplies and equipment to hard-pressed Army Group Center. But now the real epic struggle of the regiment was about to begin!

### **I. Battalion/SS-IR 4 at Serpuchov-Djetschino**

By the early morning hours of 23 December 1941, all of the troops of I./SS-IR 4 were enroute to destinations in the area held by XIII. Corps. At 0300, with the thunder of heavy artillery fire resounding in their ears, the half-frozen men of 1st disembarked from their trucks at a small village near the frontlines. Clothing bags were tossed out and stored together in designated houses. At 0400 the troops formed up for a foot march to the front.

The platoons had to make their way down a lonely forest road in hip-deep snow. After some ground had been covered an enemy patrol caught sight of the Waffen-SS troops and promptly opened fire. The men of 1st Co. quickly threw up improvised snow wall fortifications and spent the entire day there pinned down by the enemy forces. During the night of 23 December, having suffered numerous cases of frostbite and with only frozen rations for sustenance, 1st Co. slipped back to the village where they had originally arrived. Here it was made a rear-guard company of a battalion of the 260th Inf. Division.

At about noon on 24 December, 1st Company's "village" was surrounded by the Soviets. At 1300 the enemy began to attack and the SS troops fought back with small arms and hand grenades. The resistance was too much for the Reds and they pulled back for parts unknown. But 1st Co. was still in a bind; the wounded could not be evacuated and the soldiers in the vicinity from 260th Div. proved to be apathetic and fully demoralized.

Christmas night was a subdued one; a pine bough on the wall of the company command post served in place of a Christmas tree. Radio contact was luckily made with battalion HQ (260th Div.), and permission was granted for the trapped garrison to attempt a breakout at 2200 hours. Fortunately, scouts had already ascertained that there was a big hole in the enemy ring to the west, so a withdrawal in that direction began on schedule in a falling snow. The empty village was set ablaze as the SS men

left prompting one soldier to snarl: "Now that damned place is pretty good and warm!"

In small groups, the SS men slipped through a close-by Russian-held village without firing a shot. They were given an assist by "General Vodka" as all of the Red Army troops were in a drunken stupor! By Christmas morning, 1st Co. had safely reached its reception point with 260th Inf. Division. Hstuf. von Rautenfeld reported in to the battalion commander saying; "Luck was with us. We're very glad the Russians had enough schnapps!"

After the soldiers of 2nd and 4th Cos./SS-IR 4 finished driving off the Soviets around the Malojaroslavice airfield, they were quickly loaded into a waiting truck convoy for a trip to the "real" front. The combined company battle group came under the command of Hstuf. Ullman. Following a freezing night journey, the men of Kampfgruppe "Ullman" took up readiness positions around Vysokinitischi with orders to prepare for an attack along the road to Serpuchov.

Assisted by two assault guns, the two companies rapidly cleaned out an enemy infested woods and advanced down the road to a designated defensive line, where they halted to await further developments.

On 21 December 1941, 3./I./SS-IR 4 and 12./III./SS-IR 4 (machine guns) had landed at the Malojaroslavice airfield. The two companies were lumped together and during that night were sent to the vicinity of Vysokinitischi, traveling through Obnins-koje and Belusova on the way. This sector was held by parts of the 260th and 52nd Inf. Divs., but the front-line situation was now unclear. Siberian ski battalions had broken through the German security lines at many points.



**SS IR 4 machine gun position on the Oka River near Kaluga.**



**SS-Hstuf. Maitre, CO of 8./SS IR 4 and later 1./SS IR 4.**

On 22 December, the commander of 3rd Co., Hstuf. Herdt, who was also in charge of the 3rd/12th Company battlegroup, joined his command with that of a task force from the 260th Inf. Div. in a small village near an arterial road. The Soviets began pressing in on them from three sides. In the early morning hours, 12th Co., under Ostuf. Graun, began to set up firing positions for its machine gun teams in the beleaguered town. But Hstuf. Herdt was not about to yield the initiative to the Soviets; in the pre-dawn darkness he led 3rd Co. on a night march behind the enemy lines. At daybreak, the company was able to attack the Red forces from the flanks and rear and achieved a total surprise. The Russians began a hurried retreat to a small hill, but they were caught in a cross-fire by the weapons of 3rd Company. Unable to make much progress through the deep snow, the Soviets were simply slaughtered and in a short time the entire enemy battalion had been destroyed.

Flushed with success, Hstuf. Herdt now made a tragic mistake. He regrouped his company and led it over the open battlefield, which was covered with dead Russians,

but otherwise barren. While moving back towards the village, 3rd Co. left itself totally exposed. As a result, it was caught between the pincers of some Red Army units coming to relieve the now nonexistent Soviet battalion. Just as their adversaries had done before, the SS men began floundering through the deep snow in their haste to escape from this new trap. A devastating enemy fire ripped apart the company, and during the attempt to reach safety fully 90 SS men fell killed or wounded. Among the dead was the CO, Hstuf. Herdt.

Pained by the stunning losses absorbed by 3rd Co., I. Battalion's commander, Stubaf. Vitzthum, requested that its survivors be removed from the front sector. Little did he know that they would only be taken out of the frying pan and thrown into the fire! The 3rd Company's remnants were sent farther south to join the hard-pressed 52nd Inf. Div. which was valiantly resisting the onslaught of the 49th Soviet Army. In the week of 16- 22 December, the division had lost 11 battalion commanders killed or wounded—giving some idea of what the fighting was like in its sector! On 22 December alone, I./181st Inf. Rgt./52nd Inf. Div. which was defending Strongpoint Dvoriki, lost 30 men killed and 159 wounded, and its CO was also wounded.

On 23 December, 3/SS-IR 4, now led by Ostuf. Friedrichs, along with Ostuf. Graun's 12./SS-IR 4, were sent to help the Dvoriki defenders. The strength of 3rd Co. now stood at two officers/11 NCOs/55 men, while 12th Co. had 4/20/128. Both companies hauled along their equipment on hand-pulled sleds. Clothing bags and personal effects had been lost in a fire in the first deployment area. On 24 December the commander of Strongpoint Dvoriki, Hauptmann Werner, gave up his position and fell back with his command (which now included the two SS companies) on Roschtscha, to protect the withdrawal of 52nd Division's heavy weapons. This proved to be a prudent defensive move. Late in the evening a radio message reached the battle-group from Lt.Gen. Rendulic: "For your heroic actions at Roschtscha, my full appreciation. Christmas greetings! Signed: Rendulic."

On 27 December, the reinforced Kampfgruppe "Werner" with its two SS companies attacked enemy positions that were threatening the villages of Panovo and Sugurovo. This enabled the bulk of the 52nd Div. to safely retreat from the woods and fall back on Njedelnoye. While the attack proved successful, it immediately provoked enemy counterattacks which continued around the two villages until 29 December. In the evening of that day, Kampfgruppe "Werner" began pulling out towards unoccupied territory in the west. Unfortunately, the movement of the troops attracted a strong enemy attack column, and panic suddenly set in among the Kampfgruppe soldiers.

Hauptmann Werner and Ostuf. Graun desperately strove to keep the retreat orderly, and by and large they were successful. No disaster occurred and later during the night of 29/30 December, the Kampfgruppe marched out of danger and reached



the village of Gontscharovka where Stubaf. Vitzthum and part of his I. Btl. had built-up a reception point. Soon afterwards, Soviet forces launched a vigorous attack against the town, but were driven off. The SS and Wehrmacht soldiers conducted a rapid counterattack that scattered the enemy troops and succeeded in reopening the Malojaroslavice-Kaluga road to heavy weapons and supply transport.

On 31 December, KGr. "Werner" traveled south via Djetshino to Mysgi, where it entered the main defensive lines for what would be a protracted stay. However, the Waffen-SS contingents were soon given other assignments. The 3rd Co. left the Kampfgruppe on 4 January 1942 and was followed a short while later by 12th Company. The 3./SS-IR 4 had gone into battle on 22 December with a strength of 150 men; after ten days of violent fighting it only had 15 men from its original complement left! The company was reformed using regular Army replacements from 52nd Inf. Div. and by mid-January it again held 3 officers/19 NCOs/67 men. The 12th Co. had likewise suffered from some attrition; it had gone into battle with 152 troops and had been reduced to 93 soldiers. However, it was able to absorb the survivors from the badly depleted 4th Co./ 181st Inf. Rgt. (Army), which brought 12th Company's strength back up to 4 officers/23 NCOs/114 men.

## **The Defense of Kaluga**

In December 1941 the key city of Kaluga was defended by Col. Gen. Heinrici's XXXXIII. Corps consisting of the 31st, 131st and 137th Inf. Divisions. In the course of the month the Corps was reinforced by III./SS-IR 4, the 32nd Motorized Polizei Btl. and the Polizei Rgt. "Center." The component parts of III./SS-IR 4 landed at the West Kaluga airfield from 22 to 24 December. Hstuf. Vogdt, the battalion CO, arrived with his staff at 1445 hours on 22 December. The following day the regimental staff with the SS-IR 4 commander, Ostubaf. "Kap'tan" Schuldt, landed. The first III. Btl. unit to be deployed was 8th Co., which was sent off on Christmas Day to take over 12th Company's old positions.

Back in Kaluga, the regimental HQ was soon functioning near the airfield and Ostubaf. Schuldt had his first conference with the Corps' commander, Col.Gen. Heinrici at 1100 hours on 23 December. Schuldt was ordered to deploy part of his regiment in the defense of the threatened towns that lay to the south of Kaluga, running along the Vorotynsk-Sztolpovo-Pletenjevka railroad lines. On 23 December 1941, the war diary of XXXXIII. Corps carried the following extract:

"SS-IR 4 requested artillery to oppose the enemy artillery in the Oka [River] Bend, but none was available. The motorized Polizei Btl. 32 joined in the request. Colonel Gen. Heinrici told their commanders: 'You can only hope for a gift from the heavens.' [Editor's Note: i.e., snow.] At 1200 hours SS-IR 4 reported that their assigned attack south of Annenka was being carried out. The course of the attack ran as follows:

1300 hours, the regiment has broken through to Annenka and freed the supply lines to 31st Division. The attack force from SS-IR 4 was resupplied from the air. In the night hours the enemy attacked towards the west. III./SS-IR 4 stopped all of the enemy efforts in the Oka Bend, even though they were supported by all calibers of artillery."

Early in the morning of 23 December, part of III. Btl. left the general security lines east of the Kaluga airfield to go north to help free the Kaluga-Medyn supply road. After achieving its objectives, this deployment group (apparently the same one discussed in the Corps' war diary), returned back on the night of 24 December.

The regimental anti-tank platoon from 14th Co., led by Ustuf. Buettner, landed at Kaluga on 23 December along with its disassembled 3.7 cm PAK guns; these had to be carefully unloaded and put together. A staff officer from XXXXIII Corps met the platoon at the airfields and gave it its orders. It was being sent to Sztolpovo, about 20 km to the south. The journey to this village took about an hour to complete in a motorized convoy and the SS men found that they were the first German troops to occupy the town. A tributary of the Oka River, bordered by towering pine trees, ran next to Sztolpovo. There was a broken bridge across the river at a point about 8 km to the south.

The AT Platoon from 14th Co. was soon joined by 11th Co. under Ostuf. Rehburger, and together they formed a small battlegroup. As the day progressed, the Kampfgruppe came under increasing enemy pressure. The front to the south was wide open and Soviet formations were flowing to the west towards the Juchnov-Roslavl road.

During the night, Rehburger's command occupied Hill 201, which was considered the key point in the Oka Bend sector, but for a time this seemed like a useless gesture. The enemy was quite content to go around the SS positions at Sztolpovo rather than do battle. In addition, Soviet artillery batteries to the south of Hill 201 began to raise havoc on 25 December when they found the range of the West Kaluga airfield. XXXXIII. Corps war diary for this day describes what happened:

"1100 hours: Since the early morning hours, the Kaluga airfield has been under enemy artillery fire. The transport planes carrying 8./SS-IR 4 were forced to land under fire. There were no losses."

Christmas Day also saw the Soviets crossing the Oka River to the north of Kaluga and beginning to drive on the western part of the city. Enemy spearheads soon reached the Kaluga-Medyn road at Annenskaja. On 26 and 27 December, the Polizei Btl. 32 and 31st Inf. Division's regimental reserves vigorously counterattacked this incursion and drove the Soviets back over the Oka.

Hill 201 and the Kaluga airfield were the scene of heavy enemy attacks on 25 December. The airfield perimeter was stubbornly defended by 98./SS-IR 4, which except for 8th Co., was the last regimental unit to land there. The 8th Co. (machine guns), after arriving in Kaluga, was ordered to proceed to Hill 201 and provide fire support for Kampfgruppe "Rehbürger." Hstuf. Maitre, 8th Company's CO, was given instructions that said: "Hill 201 is to be held to the last man!" Fifty sleds, some with horse teams, were put at the company's disposal. Russian farmers had already volunteered to drive them, and in many cases had put their own equipment at the disposal of the German Army! The sleds were divided up between 8th Company's four platoons, and after being loaded with weapons and equipment, the march to Hill 201 got underway at 1400 hours in sub-zero temperatures.

Upon reaching the hill, Hstuf. Maitre reported in to Hstuf. Vogdt, III. Battalion's commander who had taken personal charge of the area's defense. The 8th Co. was quickly put into position. One MG platoon was placed behind 10th Co. on the left (south) side of the hill while a mortar squad was placed behind 11th Co. on the right (north) side of the hill. Other MG and mortar groups were put into reserve positions in the village of Shelybina on the east side of the hill. Still other platoons were inserted into the frontline along the Oka to the southeast and northeast of the village. The Company's 2 cm Flak guns were deployed in the southeastern sector.

The military situation in general had become so dangerous that XXXXIII. Corps staff in Kaluga was preparing to implement a large-scale withdrawal. These plans did not sit too well with Adolf Hitler, however, and at 2030 on 25 December his personal directive arrived at Corps' HQ: "Kaluga is to be held at all costs!" Any and all orders to the contrary were to be considered invalid. There would be no evacuation of the city; word of this arrived just as the supply troops were feverishly preparing to pull out!

With the Russians closing in from three sides and Hitler's orders in hand, preparations for a last-ditch defense of Kaluga were rushed into action. The front lines around Kaluga were firmed up as much as possible and by the morning of 26 December contained the following elements, running from south to north: II1./SS-IR 4, 31st Inf. Div., 32nd Polizei Btl., Polizei Rgt. "Center," 131st Inf. Div., 137th Inf. Division. After sustaining heavy losses in the course of earlier withdrawal actions, most of the companies from the infantry divisions numbered only about 35 men each.

On 26 and 27 December, the defenders of Kaluga turned back all enemy attacks. The Soviets then regrouped to await the arrival of new forces. Hill 201, held by the Waffen-SS men, became a focal point of Soviet attention. At the time the Red Army Lt.Gen. Boldin declared: "The hill must first be taken, then Kaluga will also be ours."



**SS-Ustuf. Metzger, CO of 10./SS IR 4 with his NCOs. He was killed on 8 July 1943 at Bjelgorod.**



**Regimental medical officer, Hstuf. Dr. Treutler, third from left and Ostuf. Dr. Lipok, III./SS IR 4 medical officer, second from left.**

December 28 saw the Soviets turn the full force of their artillery fire upon Hill 201 (or Mount Olivet as it was referred to by the defenders). At 1000 hours the first wave of Red Army infantry started up the foot of the hill. It was driven back only to



be immediately replaced by a new wave. Again, and again enemy mass assaults were attempted and driven off. But each time the attackers got a little bit closer to their goal. Grisly stacks of Russian corpses were soon piled up in front of the snow walls that marked the German positions. The hill defenders called for some support from 8th Company's mortars, but only a few of these worked as the firing pins on most had frozen.

In the late afternoon a strong enemy assault troop broke through the lines of Ostuf. Metzger's 10th Company. A reserve platoon under Ustuf. Bode quickly launched a counterattack and in rapid, violent fighting, the Soviet penetration force was wiped out to a man. In the course of the melee, Ustuf. Bode caught a mortar fragment in his lower left thigh and was removed from the action.

The Soviets next brought up some tanks. The 3.7 cm PAK guns from 14th Co./SS-IR 4 were quickly switched from the south to the north side of the hill to try and counter them. But they proved ineffective against the new Russian tank models, which proved impervious to even direct hits!

The fighting on 28 December ended with the onset of darkness, but before things had quieted down, two machine gun posts from 1st Platoon/8th Co. had been overrun by the Red tanks. But the men of 14th Co. also managed to knock out two of the tanks and capture their crews. Under the cover of darkness the wounded had to be evacuated to the field dressing station of III./SS-IR 4 which had been set up in a group of houses at Orjeshkova near the Kaluga airfield. The battalion medical officer, Ostuf. Dr. Lipok, worked throughout the night without pause to save the lives of his wounded comrades.

The next enemy attack came at 0100 on 29 December, when a communist force overran a machine gun post in the northwest part of Shelybina. In the course of the next hour the Soviets broke into the west portion of the town and simultaneously began moving up from the east side. Hstuf. Maitre was in Shelybina with his supply section when word of the breakthrough reached him. By chance, Ostuf. Haase, the wounded CO of 9th Co., was also there and the two SS officers moved to take charge of the situation. They assembled all of the battle-worthy troops that they could find and began a counterattack with Ostuf. Haase leading his group down the right side of the main street and Hstuf. Maitre and his men advancing down the left side of the street.

For the next three hours the two small groups of SS men held off the threatening Soviets. At daybreak the reserve machine gunners and mortar groups were able to join in and this spelled the end for the enemy. The Reds were forced back down the snow-covered hill and they became pinned down in a snow bank by the mortar crews. German medics tried to use this opportunity to assist some of the wounded Russians

on the battlefield, but they had to give up the effort when some of the wounded they sought to help began shooting at them! The machine gun group that had earlier been overrun, now emerged unscathed from a field cellar where they had taken cover.

In the morning hours, more than 100 Soviet soldiers were flushed out of the buildings and cellars in Shelybina and taken prisoner. Another 95 enemy dead were counted on the ground. The total German losses stood at two dead and six wounded. Unfortunately, the village was on fire at both ends as a result of the stiff night fighting. In the fortified snow wall positions all around the town on Hill 201, the companies of III./SS-IR 4 anxiously awaited a new Soviet assault. It would not be long in coming, in fact the enemy artillery had begun its softening up barrage not long after daybreak.

December 29 would be the decisive day—one way or another—for the defense of Hill 201. Once again, the enemy tanks were back, leading the attack wave; they virtually rolled over the almost powerless 3.7 cm PAK guns from the southeast and broke into the positions of Ostuf. Rehberger's 11th Company. The German defensive effort was made even more difficult by poorly coordinated artillery support. With the enemy rambling forward at will and the lines seeming on the verge of collapse, the battalion commander called for an emergency Stuka dive bomber strike.

With howling sirens, 27 Stukas soon bore down on the Soviet troop concentrations. Under persistent strafing and bombing, the communist attack broke down and the survivors fled in a panic for their original lines. What was left before the Waffen-SS positions was a jumbled field of death and carnage, marked by scores of twisted corpses. But the defenders had not gotten off easily either; they had about reached the end of their strength. The 8th Machine Gun Co. reported to the battalion command post that it had lost 35 dead and 40 wounded or more than half its strength. It had to be reassembled as a small "rifle" company. The first priority was to get first aid for the wounded. They were then loaded on sleds and hauled over the ice-bound Oka River to Szpasskoje where they had to wait for a motorized med-evac convoy to come get them and take them to the west. "Mt. Olivet" fast became known as the "Hill of Sorrows"!

In the meantime, the situation at Kaluga had deteriorated to the critical point. XXXXIII. Corps now decided to pull out of the city, Hitler's orders or not. At noon on 29 December, Corps HQ passed on the following orders to Hstuf. Vogdt's III./SS-IR 4:

"III./SS-IR 4 is to remove itself from Hill 201 by 30 December. It will withdraw in a body during the night hours to the Kosmatschoi-Lossva line. It will then retire into reserve. The enemy must be kept back until the morning hours of 30 December 1941."

In the course of 29 December, Ostuf. Dr. Lipok found that he had treated some 200 wounded from the battalion and it had proved possible to evacuate only some of

these for more intensive treatment. In the savage fighting for Hill 201, 180 SS men from III. Btl. had been killed, and they had to be hurriedly buried on "Mt. Olivet" in unmarked graves.

Late on the 29th, III. Btl. moved off Hill 201 towards the north (the only direction still open), where the Corps' divisions were also relocating. By the morning of 30 December, the battalion was in temporary positions behind Hill 201, and in the early afternoon the Waffen-SS troops watched the Soviets occupy the ground they had fought so hard over. With the communists now moving towards Kaluga, III. Btl. received another assignment. The earlier, optimistic bit about "retiring into reserve" was now forgotten. The new orders read as follows:

"On 31 December 1941, III./SS-IR 4 will take over positions to the south of Kolyschevo to strengthen 434th Rgt./131st Inf. Div. and to block any enemy encroachment from the south."

Hstuf. Vogdt's companies just did reach their new deployment areas before the spearheads of the Soviet attack force got there. The SS men spread out along a 3 km front that ran through Kolyschevo and dug in for the fighting sure to come.

### **The Defense of Subovo**

A look at the "big picture" gives a good indication of the desperate situation the Germans now found themselves in around Kaluga. The Red Army had torn a 45 km gap in the frontlines between Kaluga and Belev and was moving rapidly to the west. The Juchnov-Roslavl highway had been reached and captured and the communist advance forces were driving on Smolensk. The 4th German Army was teetering precariously on the brink of total disaster. The only things still propping up the front were a few strongpoints which had to be held on to at all costs. One of these key "breakwaters" was the town of Subovo to the east of Juchnov. Its defense was entrusted to II./SS-IR 4, and in a very real sense the fate of Army Group "Center" rested to an extent on the shoulders of the battalion's soldiers!

On 27 and 28 December 1941, II./SS-IR 4 and parts of 13th, 14th, 16th Companies and the Platoon "Matzke" from 11th Co., left Krakau for the South Juchnov airfield near the town of Ogi-balovo. At this point in time, XXXXIII. Corps was engaged in heavy fighting for Kaluga. The Soviets had already cut the Juchnov-Kaluga road and once II. Btl. landed it found it could not make its way through to Kaluga as ordered. This being the case, the unit was sent to Subovo, via Gladkoje and Tschelkanovo. Subovo was a critical crossroad town where the Kaluga-Juchnov highway intersected with the Medyn-Mosalsk road. II. Btl. was given the job of blocking any further enemy movement down the Kaluga road while at the same time keeping open a withdrawal route for XXXXIII. Corps.

The battalion was deployed in a half-circle around Subovo; the battle-tested 5th, 6th and 7th Cos. were inserted in the front lines and were joined later by Ustuf. Matzke's platoon from 11th Co. which had been delayed at Krakau by bad weather. The regimental support units, anti-tank and artillery sections were also sent to Subovo. II./SS-IR 4's commander, Hstuf. Walter Harzer knew what was expected of him; the town had to be held no matter what if the enemy floodtide was to be checked. He had confidence that his troops could do whatever was required of them.

While II. Btl. was going into position, Kaluga was being evacuated and XXXXIII. Corps was trying to establish a new defensive front to the north of the city. In relation to Kaluga, Subovo was about 50 km due west of it while Juchnov was closer to 75 km to the northwest of it. The thin front between Subovo and Juchnov was being held by portions of Gen. von Knobelsdorfs 19th Pz. Div., with the divisional command post at Matschalovo. To the southwest, holding blocking positions on the road to Juchnov, was the 10th Inf. Division. Both of these divisions were part of the newly brought up XXXX. Corps.

II. Btl. had hardly gotten into place before the enemy began to attack with infantry and tanks. A battle of unmitigated viciousness took shape with the Reds attacking Subovo again and again only to be thrown back each time by the SS defenders. Continuous fighting raged through the last days of December, but II. Battalion's soldiers, led by the company commanders Loose, Zische, and Hoehmann and the platoon leader Matzke, never wavered. Without pausing to rest, they fought back like cornered tigers. In addition the PAK guns of 14th Co. and the field howitzers of 13th Co. provided superlative support for the front line grenadiers; no Russians could get through.



Ostubaf. Schuldt, Regimental CO, outside his HQ, Spring 1942.



With their progress blocked at Subovo, the Reds began to attack towards the west on either side of the town. Their efforts here were more successful and a weird configuration in the German lines began to take shape. II./SS-IR 4 found itself sitting in Subovo at the apex of a 15 km long, narrow finger that now extended into the enemy lines! The northwestern portion of the “finger” was defended by emergency battlegroups composed of supply and support troops from the 19th Pz. Div.; if they ever had to give way, Subovo would become totally isolated.

But fortunately, all positions were holding and some assault guns were brought into the “finger” to assist the defenders of Subovo. With the aid of these, special “storm” troops from II. Battalion’s companies began to launch counterattacks against the Soviet incursions on either side of them. This caught the enemy off balance and substantially improved the defensive situation. But there were set backs, the commander of the 3rd Anti-tank Platoon, Ustuf. Suhrau, was killed in an enemy mortar barrage while directing close support for a counterattack.

Back at the Führer’s Headquarters the story of the struggle for Subovo had caught Hitler’s attention. While leaning over his map table he pointed to the spot marking Subovo and turned to his Waffen-SS adjutant, Hstuf. Max Wuensche, saying: “I want the men leading the defense down there to get the Knight’s Cross!” But the Führer’s wishes never seemed to filter down through the military bureaucracy; it would be two and half years before Walter Harzer won the Knight’s Cross for his role in the battle of Arnhem.

On 9 January 1942, 19th Pz. Div. reported to XXXXIII. Corps that: “The situation in Subovo at this time is unchanged. A strong enemy threat from the southeast on 10 January is anticipated.”

On the basis of this report, much of XXXXIII. Corps began withdrawing northwards (the only direction it could go), leaving a line of infantry regiments (12th, 82nd and 432nd) behind to hold open the road to Subovo. For the next ten straight days, II./SS-IR 4 fought off the enemy on a near continuous basis. At times, Stukas had to be called for to help deal with the communist tanks. But the end was now in sight.

On 19 January 1942, the German divisions between Kaluga and Medyn began a general retreat down the Juchnov-Medyn highway. The Subovo defenders were to be the last to pull out. On this same day, II. Btl. reported the sighting of 3 enemy “Spitfire” planes with British markings and the approach of large-scale enemy reconnaissance troops. The SS unit also received orders to carry out its own withdrawal from Subovo in two stages from 19 to 21 January, a mission that was accomplished without any particular difficulty.



**Hstuf. Walter Harzer, CO of II./SS IR 4.**

On 21 January II. Btl. was reunited with the regimental headquarters at a spot north of Juchnov. Only Ustuf. Matzke's platoon from 11th Co. remained in the lines, staying with the 82nd Rgt. of the 31st Inf. Division. It later took part in very bitter fighting at Kosstina with the 17th Inf. Rgt. and the platoon took heavy casualties. The survivors did not rejoin SS-IR 4 until 28 January.

In the meantime, some high level command changings had been taking place. Colonel Gen. Kuebler was replaced by Col. Gen. Heinrici as commander of 4th Army on 21 January and the CO of 31st Inf. Div., Maj.Gen. Berthold took over XXXXIII. Corps. He was in turn replaced at the helm of 31st Div. by Oberst Hossbach.

### **The Struggle for Juchnov**

At the beginning of January 1942, 4th Army held a general defensive line that ran from Malojaroslawice through Djetschino and Mysgi to Kolyshevo before turning west to Sobova and from there to a point about 10 miles south of Juchnov. In the Malojaroslawice sector were parts of the 98th, 34th, 260th, 52nd, 131st, 31st and 137th Inf. Divs. plus I. Btl./SS-IR 4.

In the night of 1 January 1942, a strong Soviet spearhead reached Malojaroslawice itself and a fierce battle for the town began. On the following night Malojaroslawice had to be evacuated and the Germans fell back towards Burakova, reaching it on 4 January. Under intense enemy pressure the retreat continued and a new makeshift defensive line was soon strung out from Mallossovo to Iljinskoje.

With elements of the 33rd Soviet Army flooding through the Borowsk area to the west, with the aim of assaulting Juchnov from the south, the defenders of Kaluga were hard put to keep pace. I./SS-IR 4 was attached to the 260th Inf. Div. which was engaged in a fighting withdrawal through Balanina, Frolova and Mussina. From 31 December 1941 until 2 January 1942, III. /SS-IR 4 fought in support of the 31st and 131st Inf. Divs. at the corner of the front lines near Kolyschevo. Particularly bloody fighting was waged here in sub-zero temperatures. On 11 January, III. Btl. began to retreat towards the Ugra sector west of Tavarkovo; its retrograde movements were covered by segments of the 32nd Polizei Battalion.

From 14 to 18 January, III./SS-IR 4 was attached to the 137th Inf. Div. and again fought in the main defensive lines, taking heavy losses. Late on 17 January, the unit again began marching westwards, this time being driven out of its positions in Malaja/Bolshaja Rudnja by heavy enemy artillery, mortar and rocket fire that had set the town ablaze. For four straight days the battalion was on the move. The Waffen-SS grenadiers had to cross the deep snow fields on foot and averaged less than two hours worth of rest per day. By 22 January, III. Btl. had only 100 of its original 500 man complement left; the rest were dead, wounded, missing, frost-bitten or prisoners.

Through the first part of January, I./SS-IR 4 continued to fight alongside 260th Div. in the middle of the Tavarkovo-Medyn defensive line. When the 260th finally pulled out, I. Btl. covered its retreat. On 10 January, I./SS-IR 4 took up positions around Kolyschevo in a half-circle facing northeast, east and southeast. The battalion remained here until 20 January, serving as the main defensive buttress for the 260th Div. in the Kondrovo sector. On 19 January, part of the SS unit helped the division block an enemy penetration at Kondrovo, but on the 20th, the battalion began a fighting retreat that took it through Panovka, Bogdanovo, Beljeikovo and other points on the Juchnov-Medyn road.

At the same time, III. Btl. also reached the Juchnov road, where it tangled with the enemy again at Krykovo. This little engagement rated a big entry in a Soviet propaganda newspaper published for the benefit of the German Army, titled "The Truth." In an article entitled "The Offensive of the Soviet Forces," it was stated that III./SS-IR 4 had been "wiped out" at Krykovo, leaving 200 officers and men dead on the battlefield with the rest fleeing. The veracity of the story couldn't quite hold water, since the battalion had only 100 soldiers to begin with during this battle!

On 21 January 1942, 4th Army issued new orders to SS-IR 4 that read:

“SS-IR 4 will be attached to the LVII. Corps (motorized). With all the strength that it can muster it is to join with the Group Meindl (paratroopers) on the Juchnov-Oschansk road facing north. It is then to outflank the enemy on the easternmost sector and commence a counterattack that will alleviate the enemy pressure on Juchnov. II./SS-IR 4 is in the Kuuschinov- kaarea to the south of Juchnov. It will be made free as soon as possible to rejoin the regiment.”

From late January to early February, the Soviets attacked towards Juchnov with everything from airborne troops to horse cavalry. On 20 January, the supply troops from II./SS-IR 4 under Ostuf. Dennstaedt struggled to keep open the main road some 15-20 km southwest of Juchnov. With a superhuman effort these men flung back Soviet airborne and cavalry forces and kept the road free for the withdrawal of German combat troops. For his courageous leadership, Ostuf. Dennstaedt would receive the Iron Cross, 1st Class.

After a month of debilitating combat, the scattered units of SS-IR 4, together with parts of various “broken” Army divisions, finally began to regroup at the North Juchnov airfield on 20/21 January 1942. After being attached to LVII. Corps, SS-IR 4 received the following orders from that command on 21 January: “Together with the reinforced elements of the Group Meindl, SS-IR 4 is to be employed in an advanced line along the Juchnov- Gschatsk road to the north to outflank and prevent further enemy movement [in that area).”

SS-IR 4 now became a subordinate element of the Group Meindl, led by Generalmajor Eugen Meindl, the 50 year old hero of the Crete campaign. The staff and I. Btl. of Meindl’s paratroop regiment had been flown into Juchnov on 15 January 1942. The other two battalions from Meindl’s regiment were fighting at different parts of the Eastern Front; one was at Schluselberg and the other was on the Mius River.

On 22 January 1942, I. and III. Btls./SS-IR 4 were sent to join Kampfgruppe “Meindl” at Fedjukovo, 30 km north of Juchnov. At this time, II. Btl. was still in the process of disengaging from the Subova strongpoint. Kampfgruppe “Meindl” now consisted of the following elements:

I.and III./SS-IR 4

One Fallschirmjäger regimental staff and staff company

One Fallschirmjäger battalion

One Luftwaffe construction battalion

One Flak detachment



One strong, detached infantry battalion

On the evening of 22 January, I. and III./SS-IR 4 reached Fedjukova and the regimental CO, Ostubaf. Schuldt reported in at Kampfgruppe HQ to see what the situation was. III. Btl. Was immediately sent out on a mission to drive back a Soviet spearhead. Hstuf. Vogdt led the battalion in a night attack along both sides of the Fedjukovo-Kolodkino road. In a violent clash, the communist forces that were trying to seize Kolodkino were dispersed by the Waffen-SS troops.

At the same time, I. Btl. under Stubaf. Vitzthum was sent to Telejujto. to occupy that town before the Russians got there. Ostubaf. Schuldt then ordered Ostuf. Metzger and his company to launch an attack on the regimental north flank towards Nono-Derevnja. This town was taken in a dashing and daring night assault that surprised the Soviet defenders, who fled wildly to the east. While this was going on, Hstuf. Harzer's valiant II. Btl. finally reached Fedjukovo and reported in to the regimental HQ.

On 23 January 1942, III. Btl. moved into jumping-off positions in the woods IV2 miles east of Kolodkino for an attack on Kolodesi, which was to be supported by the "88" Flak gun battery from KGr. "Meindl." High snow drifts and temperatures hovering at -25 F precluded any quick gain of ground. Stukas had been called upon first to soften up the enemy defenses. Once they had done their job, Hstuf. Vogdt's men went over on the attack. Slowly but surely the SS attack built up a head of steam and despite the horrible conditions, good progress was soon made. Moving forward at a quick pace, only stopping every now and then to fire their weapons, the grenadiers stormed into Kolodesi, crossed a stream, and kept on going to the village of Agaryschi. The Soviet defenders began running away to the east towards Belizy and the battle came to its conclusion.

III. Btl. regrouped in the east part of Agaryschi and counted its spoils. One hundred Russians had surrendered and another 205 were counted dead on the battlefield. Twelve artillery pieces, 20 machine guns, five anti-tank guns and large quantities of carbines were captured. III. Battalion's losses totaled 2 dead and 26 wounded.

Kampfgruppe "Meindl" now ordered III. Btl. to attack Belizy from the west on 24 January while 98th Inf. Div. moved on it from the east. But the planned assault never materialized; the enemy defensive fire directed towards III./SS-IR 4 was too great to permit the battalion to advance on Belizy, so the unit remained in place holding Kolodesi-Agaryschi, which were actually twin villages divided by a stream. On 25 January the battalion was reinforced by Hstuf. Hoehmann's 7th Co. from II. /SS-IR 4.

Telejuju and Novo-Derevnja were now held by I./SS-IR 4 with 10th Co. under Ostuf. Metzger defending the key point in the lines at Novo-Derevnja. II. Btl. was made responsible for defending the towns of Fedjukovo and Kolodkino and at this point in time the entire SS-IR 4 was fully committed to battle for the first time under one command.

But the enemy was now preparing to strike back. With all of the main units of KGr. "Meindl" in the front lines, the major supply route to Prisselje was left unprotected. A Soviet ski troop task force promptly broke through the thinly guarded front at Ssemenowskoje and was able to sever the Kolodkino-Kolodesi road in the sector of III./SS-IR 4 and then advance to take the town of Prisselje. This created a huge logistics mess for the Kampfgruppe, which would have to be dealt with in the near future. But for the moment, the battlegroup's units were engaged again in a struggle for survival.

On 26 January 1942, 12th, 13th and 14th Cos./SS-IR 4, reached Fedjukovo and were quickly deployed in different supporting positions. 13th and 14th Companies along with some other regimental troops and an engineer platoon from 16th Co. had finally left Krakow for Juchnov in a motorized convoy in mid-January. The heavy artillery and anti-tank guns attached to these companies had to be transferred to horse-drawn sleds in order to reach their designated positions. The severe cold took a heavy toll on the trucks, whose motors often froze solid overnight. In the morning, fires often had to be started under the engine, which was a procedure that sometimes didn't work.



**Hstuf. Harzer presents the 180 survivors (out of 2,500) to Ostubaf. Schuldt, April 1942.**

The Soviet command next directed its attention to the exposed positions of III. Btl. and on 28 and 29 January this unit was hit by strong attacks from both the east and south. The "88" gun battery stationed 12 km away at Fedjukovo was called upon to assist the battalion, although firing ranges had to be transmitted via radio. The most violent fighting raged from Chmylovka to Agaryschi where one enemy company after another was shot to pieces. At nightfall on 29 January the frustrated Soviets pounded the area with artillery fire, setting the SS held villages on fire. The German soldiers were forced to hug the ground in their snow-covered bunkers and foxholes while the temperature plummeted to more than — 30 F below zero!

On 29 January 1942, Gen. Meindl made the following report on the condition of SS-IR 4 to XII. Corps HQ:

"1. The combat strength of SS-IR 4 is only about 700 men. For the last three days, shortages in munitions and supplies have developed.

"2. [Regimental] attacks must have the support of heavy weapons, otherwise there will be an unnecessary loss of blood with no possibility of success."

At 1930 hours a radio message from SS-IR 4 HQ reached Meindl:

"742 men are holding 10 villages. We do not have enough ammunition for our heavy weapons to preclude the possibility of a breakthrough by a mass attack."

The early morning hours of 30 January were unnaturally tranquil in III. Battalion's sector; but this only caused Hstuf. Vogdt's men to prepare for the worst. Fortunately supplies were dropped to the regimental elements by air, thus helping to alleviate some of the severe shortages. But the Soviet pressure would continue to threaten the lifeline of the regiment until the town of Prisselje was retaken, so a 100 man battlegroup to be led by Ustuf. Matzke was formed to do just that.

Scouting parties observed that there was substantial enemy east-west troop movement through Prisselje, so Kampfgruppe "Matzke" had to be careful not to prematurely stumble into any Red Army troops before reaching the attack zone. At one point an enemy ski platoon passed right by the flank of KGr. "Matzke," but failed to recognize the German soldiers for what they were!

Somewhat after 1100 hours on 30 January, Ustuf. Matzke's troops attacked Prisselje. In bitter house-to-house fighting the enemy was pushed out and a Soviet supply column consisting of pony wagons and sleds filled with weapons and equipment was destroyed. Parts of II. Btl. and 16th Co. (engineers) rushed ahead to seize the nearby village of Novo-Uspenskaja. At 1300 hours, Gen.Maj. Meindl was able to send the following message to Corps' HQ:

“Prisselje is in our hands; munitions for SS-IR 4 can go through!”

In the evening of 30 January it proved possible for the first time in days to transport the badly wounded SS men in Fedjukovo to the field hospital at Juchnov. But from Juchnov the railroad line to Roslavl was cut at many points by the enemy, so the most severe casualties had to be flown out in Ju 52 transport planes (70 separate flights in two days), although two large groups of the less badly wounded were sent out to the west in columns of horse pulled sleds.



**SS IR 4's surviving 20 officers (out of 300), April 1942.**

### **Desperate Battles**

On the morning of 31 January 1942, the Soviets began a massive tank-supported assault on Kolodesi-Agaryschi. One enemy contingent swiftly broke through the lines and overran the SS-IR 4 supply route about 2 km east of Kolodkino. The principal objective of the attack was the destruction of III./SS-IR 4, and within a short time this became a very likely possibility. At 1145, SS-IR 4 HQ radioed the command post of 268 Inf. Div. reporting enemy tanks advancing on Agaryschi and requesting artillery fire on Belizy. The division was unable to help with the request so Stukas were called upon. This assistance also failed to materialize and at 1155, SS-IR 4 again radioed 268th Div.: “Enemy troops with tanks entering Agaryschi.” At 1200, artillery gunners from the 98th Inf. Div. were instructed to fire upon Belizy and Loschevo, while some of the division’s infantry prepared to launch a relief attack. But it was almost too late for III. Btl.; the Reds had reached the unit’s “snow wall” defenses with a batch of new T-34 tanks.



Within minutes, III./SS-IR 4 was fighting for its life. In the eastern part of Agaryschi, 7th, 9th and 11th Companies were overrun and the survivors scattered for new cover. Ostuf. Reh- burger, commanding 11th Co. and Hstuf. Kohn, the leader of the 14th Anti-tank Co. were both killed. The Russian tanks kept moving forward and four of them advanced on three 3.7 cm antitank guns from 14th Company. The SS gunners bravely stayed in place and scored one direct hit after another on the T-34's but with no effect! The tanks kept coming and simply plowed into the anti-tank guns, crushing them into mangled metal.

The 8th Company's machine gun and mortar crews suffered a similar fate; the tanks simply rolled over their positions and the crewmen fled for their lives. Ustuf. Unterrainer, the battalion ordnance officer, regrouped a platoon of survivors and led them in a courageous counterattack; he was immediately killed and his men dispersed. Agaryschi had to be abandoned. The remnants of 8th, 9th, 11th and 14th Companies fell back on Kolodesi. The battalion adjutant, Ustuf. Balz, was killed in the retreat and many wounded and dead were left behind. All of the members of 8th Company's mortar group, save one, were killed. Only Rottenführer Fregin remained alive and he was forced to lay still in the snow all day feigning death. At night he slipped through the Russian sentry posts and rejoined his unit.

At Kolodesi, which was defended by Hstuf. Hoehmann's 7th Co., the battalion's survivors reassembled. A steep banked, snow-filled stream bed that separated Kolodesi from Agaryschi effectively stopped the Russian tanks. An old, rotten wooden bridge was the only easy way across the gorge and this could not support the weight of the tanks. But the Red Army infantrymen were not deterred; they streamed across the stream bed and continued the attack.

The 3rd Platoon/7th Co., under Oscha. Seeger, counterattacked through the ruins of the village and flung the communist foot soldiers back across the stream. But they reassembled, and supported by the direct fire of their tanks, resumed their assault. Hstuf. Hoehmann led the defensive effort at the head of his company and as a result, was killed in action. In the west part of Kolodesi, the light artillery section from 13th Co. ran out of ammunition. The crews then spiked their guns and joined the infantry.

By 1600 hours, all of the heavy weapons belonging to III. Btl. had been silenced and the SS riflemen were down to only 5-10 cartridges apiece. They were also totally exhausted, but fortunately, so were the Reds. But a close eye had to be kept on the Soviet tanks in the west part of Agaryschi; they kept opening fire on any careless German troops. At this critical juncture, Hstuf. Vogdt, the battalion CO, radioed regimental HQ in Fedju- kovo for further instructions. He was particularly concerned over the lack of ammunition.

For the regimental commander, Ostubaf. Schuldt, there was only one solution. He sent the following directives back to III. Btl.:

“III./SS-IR 4 will break out to the west. In the east part of the forest eastwards of Kolodino it will be joined by II. Battalion!”

Hstuf. Vogdt hurriedly prepared III. Btl. for the break out. Leading off the march would be Hstuf. Maitre with parts of 7th and 8th Companies. He was to follow the supply road to the west. Moving through deep snow in a widely spread-out group, Maitre’s column soon drew enemy fire from the nearby forests. Suddenly some white-clad Soviet advance troops came charging towards the SS force, shouting “hurrah, hurrah.” With cool deliberation, Hstuf. Maitre’s men used up the last of their ammunition as they succeeded in driving off their Russian assailants towards the south.

Behind Maitre’s group came pony drawn sleds hauling the battalion’s artillery pieces. It was slow going and the engineers from 16th Co. had to help out at times. Along the break out route, three overturned horse sleds with dead drivers were found. They had been part of a regimental supply convoy that was wiped out on 25 January. However, some artillery rounds were salvaged from the wrecked sleds. The field pieces were then set up in firing positions and fed the new-found ammunition. The Waffen-SS gunners then shelled Agaryshi until the onset of darkness, giving the Russians an unpleasant surprise and providing cover for the withdrawing battalion.

During the night, the last part of III. Btl., personally led by Hstuf. Vogdt, successfully reached II. Battalion’s positions at Kolodino. The battalion had brought out 82 wounded but had also left behind many dead and unaccounted for. On 1 February, III./SS-IR 4 was redeployed in Novo-Derewnya, except for its 10th Co., which had been attached to a battalion from the 268th Inf. Div. further to the north. A 5 cm PAK gun was sent to III. Btl. to replace its lost anti-tank cannons.

At this time, the other battalions of SS-IR 4 were situated as follows: II. Btl. in Kolodino and I. Btl. in Jeshovo. The defensive front was critically short of supplies and was being threatened all over. During a manpower check it was discovered that all of SS-IR 4’s battalions were down to company strength.

By 3 February, little had changed in the lines. I./SS-IR 4 under Stubaf. Vitzthum was still in Jeshovo, facing east. To its southeast was a 5 km gap in the lines to the positions held by III. Battalion. To the north a tenuous link-up was maintained to the 17th Inf. Div. which was located to the north of Krapivka. II./SS-IR 4 in Kolodino with the regimental HQ, was worried about the tanks that had overrun III. Battalion. No unit in the regiment had weapons that were adequate to deal with the new T-34’s, and

tensions were growing as enemy assault parties kept up hit-and-run raids through gaps in the regimental positions.

Finally, on the night of 4/5 February, the loud rumbling, rattling sound of tanks on the move could be heard emanating from the woods to the east of Kolodino. Hstuf. Harzer immediately put his entire battalion on alert. At daybreak, the Red tanks and accompanying infantry began to move on Kolodino. This time fate played a kind hand: the lead tank detonated a "T"-mine and exploded and the following tanks got bogged down in deep snow. Without even firing a shot, the SS defenders watched in amazement as the enemy attack force floundered in confusion.

Then somebody gave the orders to open fire. The German field howitzers began shelling the tanks, and they stopped struggling to move forward long enough to return the fire. But once again the shells merely bounced off of the thick armor of the T-34's. There was only one sure way to get them: by hand! Death-defying SS troopers, loaded down with Teller mines, sprang from their positions and ran towards the tanks. It was a risky business; some men were shot down but others got their pay-loads through to the tanks. But even these explosive charges were not effective enough to cripple the Soviet armored monsters. Still the explosives shook up the tank crews and got the message across that they would be better off by withdrawing from the immediate vicinity.

Whoever was running the Red Army attack was less than impressed by the cautious approach taken by the tank crews and within a few minutes they were on their way back towards the German lines. SS-IR 4's feeble 3.7 cm anti-tank guns began blazing away but were quickly overwhelmed by the tanks; their crews headed for safer ground. The T-34's opened up on the wooden buildings in Kolodkino and had most of them ablaze in short order. Then the Red infantry tried to move forward. From out of their foxholes in the frozen, snow-covered ground the SS men fought back furiously with their small arms, and the Soviet soldiers were soon heading back in full retreat.

But the general situation looked hopeless; the men of II. Btl. were in their last defensive positions, they had no further place to run to. In addition, the battalion had sustained high losses and the infernal tanks were still there, blazing away, seemingly unstoppable. The only thing that kept them back momentarily were the hand grenades the SS men pelted them with. At this juncture, Hstuf. Harzer radioed regimental HQ for further instructions. After hearing about the battalion's predicament, Ostubaf. Schuldt ordered it to fall back on Fedjukovo.

All available parts of the regiment would now be used to build a blocking line between Fedjukovo and Kolodino. But in the meantime, the fighting in Kolodino continued. II. Battalion's dressing station was repeatedly shelled by the enemy tanks (despite its visible Red Cross insignia), and almost all of the medics were killed. The

battalion doctor, Ostuf. Reiner was Finally, Hstuf. Harzer issued these orders to his company commanders: “[Commence] fighting withdrawal to Fedjukovo.”

The retreat was not an easy one. Hstuf. Buhmueller and his engineers from part of 16th Co. tried to provide cover fire for the rest of the battalion, but Buhmueller was soon severely wounded and hovered between life and death. The remnants of the escaping unit were shredded by the tank fire and all too many fatalities occurred as a result. In the evening of 5 February, II. Battalion’s 150 survivors reached the newly designated interception line, but there would still be no respite.

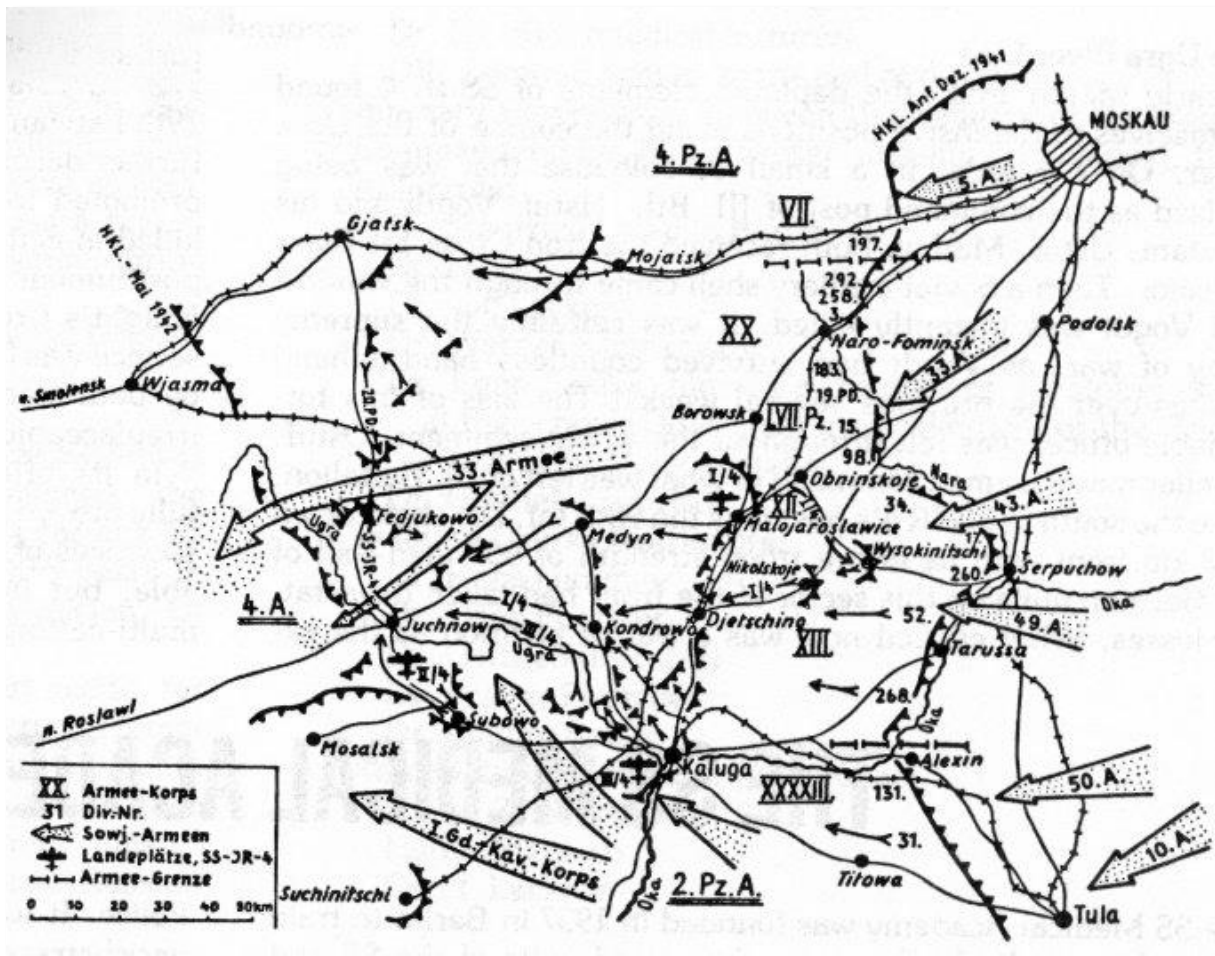
Regimental HQ sent a small reserve group and two new field howitzers to II. Btl. to help the unit face the enemy follow-up attack that was sure to follow on the next day. If II. Btl. could not hold now, Fedjukovo would fall to the enemy. During the night, 15 tanks and assault guns providentially turned up in Fedjukovo to support the regiment. Some of them were detached and sent to join Hstuf. Harzer’s battalion. At the same time a recce patrol reported in to the II. Btl. command post after observing the enemy elements in Kolodkino. It seems that after their great victory the Russians had stopped to celebrate and were now mostly all quite drunk.

Hstuf. Harzer digested the information and came up with one thought: counterattack! An assault troop was quickly formed and the tank commanders were given the job of supporting it. A little bit after midnight on 6 February, the bold task force started off on its mission.

In the bright moonlight of a bitterly cold night, the German tanks led the battalion back into Kolodkino. The town was quiet; its Red Army occupants were oblivious to the world, mostly dead drunk. The fatigued soldiers of II. Btl. had to shake themselves awake. Then the frightful memories of the previous day’s fighting subsided and the old battle spirit came back to them. Alongside the tanks they stormed into Kolodkino.

The tank cannons barked, the machine guns clattered and the soldiers yelled. Within minutes six enemy T-34’s went up in flames. The Soviet infantry woke up in horror, and those that could began running madly towards the east. All the while the SS men dashed into the few standing houses and began mopping up. They met little or no resistance. As the dawn broke, the whole town and the old defensive lines were back in German hands. A defeat had been turned into a success in the span of only a few hours! With the arrival of daylight, a particularly horrifying tragedy was revealed: 40 officers and men from 16th Co. (Engineers) who had been cut off and captured were found bound and shot in the head. On top of this the wounded that had been left behind were also found—they had been shot in the nape of the neck. No words were necessary; the bestiality of the communists had once again been revealed. No one had to ask themselves “What are we fighting for?”.





Situation Map of the German 4<sup>th</sup> Army December 1941 to April 1942.

In the afternoon, Oberst Greiner, CO of the 268th Inf. Div., visited Kolodkino to get an overview of the situation from Hstuf. Harzer. In the days to come, SS-IR 4 would fight alongside 268th Div. in the struggle to free the sectors to the north.

The other units of SS-IR 4 had not been left out of the action. I. Btl. (a designation in name only!) had a net strength of one officer, eight NCOs and 45 men. These 54 soldiers were still divided into two rifle and one machine gun "companies," that were positioned around Jeshovo under the overall command of Hstuf. Maitre. To the battalion's east were a string of three small outposts that connected it to III. Btl., while to the west a fragile contact was maintained with the 55th Inf. Regiment. The defenses were so weak that nerves were always at the breaking point. On 15 February, a Russian assault troop attacked Jeshovo; it was driven off but Hstuf. Maitre was wounded, thus leaving the battalion with no officers of its own. It now had to borrow one from the 55th Inf. Regiment.

Maitre radioed in a report of his losses to Ostubaf. Schuldt and a "Hiwi" (Russian volunteer helper) was assigned to evacuate the battalion wounded in a horse drawn sled packed with straw. The destination was the dressing station in Feldjukovo. En

route the sled was ambushed by a Russian scouting party that had infiltrated into the adjacent woods. With bullets flying by his face the “Hiwi” driver vigorously applied his whip to the horse and the sled raced madly away, out of reach of the Soviets. It later pulled into Feldjukovo with the horse steaming and foaming, but the cargo intact.

III. Btl./SS-IR 4 was lucky in that it still had five officers left, though two of them were medical doctors. They were, all told: Ostuf. Dr. Lipok, Ustuf. Dr. Hampel, Hstuf. Vogdt (the CO), and the company commanders Ustuf. Matzke and Ustuf. Metzger. The battalion strength was about equal to that of one strong company. On 18 February 1942 the German attack to re-establish links to the north began. After a good “softening up” barrage from the artillery, 17th Inf. Div. led the drive towards Sacharovo; on its right flank was II./SS-IR 4 (Harzer) and a company from III./SS-IR 4 (metzger).

II. Btl. had the twin objectives of resecuring Jeshovo (which I. Btl. had been forced to abandon) and then attack towards Mjakota. Supported by Stukas, Hstuf. Harzer’s men attained their goals with the loss of three killed and several wounded. The enemy had been severely weakened by hunger and unbelievably heavy losses, so by the end of the month it proved possible to establish a new, and reasonably formidable, defensive line along the Ugra River. Of course SS-IR 4 had not fared too well either; in two months of non-stop action it had lost 80% of its troops but remained in the front lines!

### **The Ugra River Line**

In early March 1942, the depleted elements of SS-IR 4 found themselves in defensive positions along the course of the Ugra River. On 6 March, in a small schoolhouse that was being utilized as the command post of III. Btl., Hstuf. Vogdt and his adjutant, Ustuf. Mathoi, both received the Iron Cross 1st Class for valor. Then a Soviet artillery shell came through the window and Vogdt was instantly killed. It was certainly the supreme irony of war, as Vogdt had survived countless hand-to-hand clashes over the previous several weeks! The loss of this formidable officer was felt throughout the whole regiment. Ostuf. Mueller now assumed command of what was left of III. Battalion.

To the south of SS-IR 4’s positions the 98th Inf. Div. held down a 12 km front with its entire troop strength of 900 men—all of the German units on this sector of the front had taken devastating losses. What ensued now was a war of attrition as the exhausted Germans and Russians pummeled each other with artillery fire across the Ugra. In the middle of March, SS-IR 4 received its first replacements of the winter: a group of young and eager Swiss volunteers. This was perhaps the only batch of volunteers from this neutral country which would be sent to a Waffen-SS unit in a “national cluster.” Within a month many of these brave “sons of Europe” would also become casualties.

On 14 April 1942, the nightmare of the Eastern Front during the winter of 1941/42 was over for SS-IR 4 when the remnants of the regiment were sent back to Germany for a well-deserved rest. After two weeks of home leave, the regiment's soldiers reassembled in Krakow to begin the process of rebuilding the unit. Many recovered wounded and new replacements were now added. For the valiant performance of his regiment, SS- Obersturmbannführer "Kapt'n" Schuldt was awarded the Knight's Cross.

Perhaps the ultimate compliment for the unit came from the Führer himself. On his birthday, 20 April, Hitler bestowed the name "Langemarck" on the SS-IR 4. Langemarck was the town in Flanders where in World War I, endless ranks of student volunteers had hurled themselves again and again against impregnable British machine gun positions, singing the national anthem. Before the day was done even disarmed and wounded soldiers had joined in, in an example of total dedication and sacrifice. In this manner an entire division of 18 to 20-year olds was annihilated at Langemarck, but their example stirred the entire German Army. The comparison with SS-IR 4 was obvious; from December 1941 to April 1942 the regiment's strength went from 2500 combatants to 180! This was a casualty rate of 93%! The title of "Langemarck" had certainly been earned in blood by the men of the regiment.

Late in May, the reformed unit joined the SS Panzer Grenadier Div. "Das Reich," which was also reforming after a hard winter's combat at the Fallingbomel training camp. SS-IR 4 was now reorganized as a motorized "fast" rifle regiment, consisting of two rifle battalions of five companies each and a motorcycle detachment. In the course of the summer of 1942, the infantry companies of I. Btl. were broken up and used as replacements for the rest of the "Das Reich" Division. II. Btl. became the II. Abteilung of the newly authorized SS Pz. Rgt. 2 "Das Reich," while only the motorcycle detachment remained intact. For several months it was carried on the divisional roster as the SS Kradschützen Btl. "Langemarck." In 1943 this unit was dissolved and the title "Langemarck" was transferred to the 6th SS Sturmbrigade, composed of Flemish volunteers. In much difficult fighting in 1944 and 1945, they continued to maintain the honor of the name "Langemarck."

In the winter of 1942/1943, "Kapt'n" Schuldt commanded a SS/Police battlegroup with success on the southern part of the Eastern Front. Later in 1943 he took command of the 2nd Latvian SS Volunteer Brigade which would be transformed into the 19th Latvian SS Division. Schuldt led this unit brilliantly; being further decorated with the Oakleaves to the Knight's Cross and promoted to the rank of Oberführer. In March 1944 he was killed-in-action leading his command and was honored by the posthumous decoration of the Swords to the Oakleaves of the Knight's Cross and a promotion to Brigadeführer. A funeral service was held for him in Riga, Latvia and it was well attended by both Germans and Latvians alike. Hinrich Schuldt was an irreplaceable Waffen-SS officer.

In its brief but violent existence, SS-IR 4 “Langemarck” fully proved itself as a superior military unit. The dedication and sacrifices of its soldiers speak for themselves. It was a remarkable, but in many ways typical, representative of the elite multi-national army that was the Waffen-SS.