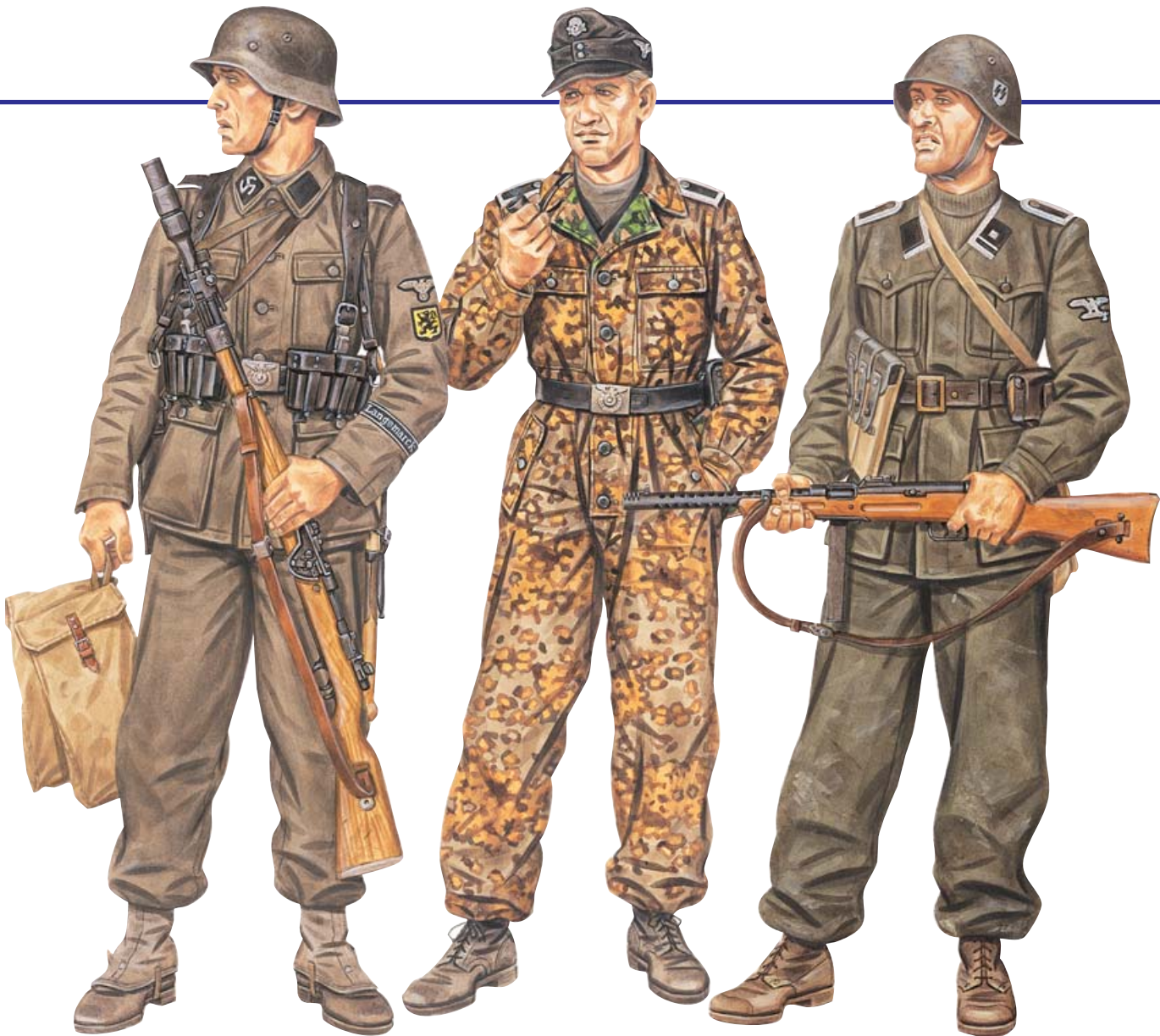


The Waffen-SS (4)

24. to 38. Divisions, & Volunteer Legions



Gordon Williamson • Illustrated by Stephen Andrew

Men-at-Arms • 420

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Series editor Martin Windrow

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INTRODUCTION

By 1944, when the units and formations covered in this text began to appear in the Waffen-SS order of battle, the relaxation of the original standards demanded of recruits to this most elitist of the German armed services was complete.

The determination of the Reichsführer-SS, Heinrich Himmler, to expand the military arm of his empire had led, in 1939–41, to the transfer of German SS-Totenkopfstandarte security guard units into SS-Divisions for front line service (with mixed results), and into the SS-Brigades of his personal anti-partisan command operating behind the lines in Russia – the Kommandostab RF-SS. This was paralleled by the recruitment in 1940–42 of non-Germans of acceptably ‘Germanic’ racial origin: at first Western European, Scandinavian and Baltic volunteers, and later ethnic Germans or ‘Volksdeutsche’ from occupied or allied Eastern states (principally the Balkans and Hungary). Their ethnic difference from the original ‘Reichsdeutsche’ divisions was signalled by their assembly into SS-Freiwilligen or ‘Volunteer’ divisions – a title that

was less than accurate in many cases.

In the face of huge losses on the Eastern Front, and the need to police the vast territories occupied in the East and Balkans, in 1943 Himmler and his recruitment chief, SS-Ogruf Gottlob Berger, finally abandoned Nazi racial obsessions and accepted Slavs and even Balkan Muslims as cannon-fodder, in what were eventually titled Waffen Divisionen der SS (‘Armed Divisions of the SS’).

The crises of 1944–45 would see actual or nominal ‘divisions’ formed from an increasingly motley range of manpower sources. The best of these were the survivors of the Western European volunteer regiments or ‘legions’, now used as the nuclei for expanded brigades and finally divisions, bulked out with men from various other sources including Volksdeutsche conscripts. The drive to gather up ethnic Germans and collaborationist foreigners, to form several new divisions, would become ever less discriminating. Drafts of bewildered German airmen and sailors for whom there were no longer aircraft, ships or fuel might find themselves transferred at the stroke of a pen into the Waffen-SS, and thrust into gaps in the Russian Front after the sketchiest preparation.

Léon Degrelle, at this date a subaltern in the Belgian Assault Brigade *Wallonien*, talking to an SS war correspondent some time in summer 1943. The Army pattern Edelweiss sleeve patch was acquired by the Walloon volunteer regiment before its transfer to the Waffen-SS in June 1943. The journalist, with a private's plain black patch on the dark green collar of his M1936-style tunic, is identified by the cuff title ‘SS-Kriegsberichter’. (Josef Charita)



SS-Untersturmführer Gunther Knoll, serving on the staff of V SS Volunteer Mountain Corps (the edge of the SS mountain troops' Edelweiss is just visible on his right sleeve). A corps command had a varying order-of-battle: units assigned as 'corps troops' under direct command tended to be attached for longer periods, but the various component divisions were often transferred from one corps to another at short intervals. V SS-Freiwilligen Gebirgs Armeekorps was formed in Yugoslavia under SS-Ogruf Artur Phleps in July 1943, initially as the higher command for 7. SS-Div Prinz Eugen and the new 13. SS-Div Handschar plus Army units. The SS-Karstwehr Bataillon was listed among its corps units.



Training school and depot personnel would be assembled around worn-down battlegroups into 'paper' SS divisions with minimal armament and transport. The retreating front line caught up with sinister 'anti-partisan' gangs of German criminals and foreign renegades redesignated as combat divisions, who sometimes met a richly deserved fate at the hands of the avenging Red Army.

Units quoted from fragmentary official documents as components of late-war formations may never actually have been formed, or may have served dispersed without ever being assembled under effective divisional command. The battlefield value of these units was wildly uneven; but, remarkably, a few of them fought on stubbornly amid the ruins until the very last hours of the Third Reich.

THE DIVISIONS: 24. WAFFEN GEBIRGS (KARSTJÄGER) DIVISION DER SS

Designations

1942	SS-Karstwehr Bataillon
September 1944	24. Waffen-Gebirgs (Karstjäger) Division der SS
December 1944	Waffen Gebirgs (Karstjäger) Brigade der SS

Commanders

Dec 1944 SS-Obersturmbannführer Karl Marx; *Dec 1944–Feb 1945* SS-Sturmbannführer Werner Hahn; *Feb–May 1945* SS-Oberführer Adolf Wagner

Principal elements

Waffen-Gebirgsjäger Regiment der SS 59; Waffen-Gebirgsjäger Regiment der SS 60; SS-Panzer Kompanie; Waffen-Gebirgs Artillerie Regiment der SS 24; SS-Gebirgs Pionier Kompanie 24

Campaigns

In June–August 1942 an SS-Karstwehr Kompanie was formed for anti-partisan duties in the high alpine terrain of the Karst – the mountainous border areas between Italy, Austria and Slovenia. In November it was ordered expanded to battalion strength, with just under 500 men. Spending the first half of 1943 training in Austria, it was committed to action after the Italian surrender that September, disarming Italian troops at Taravasio and protecting ethnic German communities around Camporosso and Boscaverde. Between October 1943 and June 1944, headquartered at Gradisca, it carried out anti-partisan actions in northern Italy around Trieste, Udine and the Istrian peninsula, and unit strength increased to just under 1,000 men. In July 1944, Himmler ordered it upgraded to a 'division' with an establishment of 6,600, under the supervision of the notorious SS-Gruf Odilo Globocnik, Higher SS & Police Leader for the Adriatic coastal region.¹



A grainy but extremely rare photograph of the 'H' collar patch being worn, in the identity photo from the paybook of a Hungarian soldier from 25. W Gren Div der SS Hunyadi. (Gary Wood)

In August–November *Karstjäger* continued its anti-partisan operations in the same areas; but by December 1944 its strength had still only reached around 3,000 men, and the division was downgraded to brigade status. Early in 1945 it clashed with partisans supported by British troops in the Julian Alps. In the closing weeks of the war the brigade was attached to a Kampfgruppe under SS-Brigaf Heinz Harmel, former commander of the *Fruntsberg* Division (see MAA 404, page 46), which successfully held open the Karawanken passes for German units retreating from the Balkans into Austria, so that they could make their surrender to British troops. On 9 May 1945, *Karstjäger* surrendered to the British 6th Armoured Division – it was one of the very last German units to lay down its arms.

Special insignia

A right hand collar patch was manufactured showing a stylised flower, but it is believed that no examples were ever issued or worn, and that personnel wore the SS-runes.

25. WAFFEN GRENADIER DIVISION DER SS HUNYADI (ungarische Nr.1)

Designations

April 1944 25. SS-Freiwilligen Grenadier Division
 November 1944 25. Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS *Hunyadi*² (ungarische Nr.1)

Commanders

Nov 1944 SS-Oberführer Thomas Müller; *Nov 1944–May 1945* Waffen-Gruppenführer Jozef Grassy

Principal elements

Waffen Grenadier Regiment der SS 61; Waffen Grenadier Regiment der SS 62; Waffen Grenadier Regiment der SS 63; Waffen Schi Bataillon der SS 25; Waffen Artillerie Regiment der SS 25

Campaigns

In October 1944 the Germans overthrew the Hungarian government of Adml Horthy, who had been planning a separate armistice with the USSR, and installed a compliant fascist regime under Ferenc Szalasi, leader of the Arrow Cross movement. Almost immediately the Hungarians were instructed to provide the manpower for two Waffen-SS

¹ Himmler created the position of Höhere-SS und Polizeiführer (HSSPF), appointing a senior officer – usually an SS-Gruf or SS-Ogruf – in every military district (Wehrkreis) in Germany and in the occupied territories. They were effectively Himmler's personal representatives in the region, and on occasion had control of Waffen-SS as well as the usual police and security forces.

² Janos Hunyadi (c1387–1456) was Captain-General of Hungary, and her greatest leader in the wars against the Turks in the 1440s–50s.