Portfolio: 
The Waffen SS in Color
By Blaine Taylor

Even now, almost seven decades after the end of the Second World War, interest in what was undoubtedly the Third Reich’s most infamous armed forces branch—the Waffen (Armed) SS—remains high, with no expectation of that interest declining in the foreseeable future. Indeed, it’s a fair statement the infamy of the SS puts it on an equal footing—in terms of notoriety in popular culture—with the Roman Praetorian Guard, the Turkish Janissaries, the French Foreign Legion and Napoleon’s Imperial Guard.

That notoriety is even more remarkable when we consider the term “Waffen SS” was itself largely unknown at World War II’s outset. Even so, the organization then soon made a name for itself for ferocity and brutality on and off the battlefield. By 1939 the more general term “SS” was already known around the world due to the attention lavished on those black-clad formations at the Nazi Party’s massive prewar rallies. By the time of the hard-fought 1944 Normandy campaign, however, both the Western Allies and Soviets had a healthy respect for the “asphalt soldiers” in their field gray and camouflage uniforms. (Along with the US Marine Corps, the Waffen SS were the only troops to regularly use the latter during the war.) Indeed, the two words most often used in official Allied communiqués to describe the SS units encountered in combat were “elite” and “fanatical.”

The Waffen SS had begun its bloody history as the Verfuegungstruppen (VT or Special Purpose Troops) in 1934 with, however, only two regiments initially appearing, and only carrying arms given them by the regular army. The men swore loyalty to Hitler, though, rather than to Germany or its army. The dictator felt the need for such units after having neutered the precursor organization, the Sturmabteilung (Storm Troops), as a stop to the army, which was jealous of its right to be the sole national arms bearer.

By early 1938 the number of VT units doubled to four regiments, all still sporting the standard “field

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mander at center holds the rank of first lieutenant. An oil painting by O. Anton entitled Assault Crossing of Rhine River by SS Troops. They are shown rowing collapsible rubber boats, which were employed extensively and successfully in the 1940 campaigns against Belgium, Holland and France. The MG34 machine gun in the prow has its bipod folded back and was available in both light-weight and middle-weight versions. Its standard drum magazine held 50 rounds, and a “double drum” 75. The trooper rowing at left is an acting corporal, while the boat commander at center holds the rank of first lieutenant.

The young sergeant in this painting wears the tanker’s short-waisted jacket and puffed trousers of the unit after it became a panzer division. The same type of uniform, also in black (but only to conceal motor oil stains), was worn by regular army tankers. Note, too, the silver Adolf Hitler unit cuffband on the left lower sleeve and the Infantry Assault Badge on the front of the jacket. The purposeful stare of the young soldier was stereotypic of the Waffen SS: trained, intensely indoctrinated to ideologically and motivation.

The young soldier was stereotypic of the Waffen SS: trained, intensely indoctrinated and, above all, highly motivated.

By the end of the Second World War there were more than 600,000 serving in the Waffen SS, arrayed across the battlefields of Europe in some 50 divisions and separate brigades. How those brutal men—who during the war could be rotated in assignments between the various combat fronts and guarding the labor and death camps—saw themselves is presented here in a selection of captured near the German invasion there on 22 June 1941.

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gray (“Feldgrau”) uniform of the regular army. Even then, how- ever, the main mission of the SS overall—armed or not—was to prevent any coup aimed at removing Hitler from power.

Privately, SS Chief Heinrich Himmler never forgot his goal that one day his formations of Nazi Party faithfull would finally and fully submerge the regular army. Along that line, had SS Gen. Josef “Sepp” Dietrich won the Battle of the Bulge, both he and fellow SS Gen. Paul Hausser likely would’ve been created by Hitler as the first SS field marshals. Indeed, had the Nazis won the Second World War, there likely would’ve been a full-on SS vs. regular army civil war for hegemony in the triumphant postwar Reich.

The prewar Waffen SS received standard German Army military training, but with additional Nazi political and ideological indoctrination thrown in to better make them into what they were intended to be: the shock troops of the Nazis “New Order” in Europe. The Waffen SS took part in the occupations of the Rhineland in 1936, of Austria and the Czech Sudetenland in 1938, and of the rest of dismembered Czechoslovakia in 1939, all before their blooding in open combat on the plains of Poland during September of that last year. They fought in that campaign fully sub-ordinated to the operational control of the regular army’s high command.

Next the SS fought in the western campaigns of the spring and summer of 1940, spearheaded the invasions of Greece and Yugoslavia in 1941, and then saw their largest commitment on the eastern front against the Red Army from 1941 to 1945. They saw no action in North Africa, but they helped to brutally occupy former-Fascist Italy in September 1943. They also fought Allied armies in the 1944-45 campaigns in northwest Europe, especially in the Battle of the Bulge, which remains the largest single combat action undertaken to date by the US Army. The Waffen SS fought its final major actions on the eastern front against the Red Army steamroller in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and, last, in the very streets of the German capital Berlin.

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Marching SS Troops, a prewar painting by artist Eduard Thomy. The map cases on the belts of the trio of leading soldiers indicate this is a field training exercise, and the men also appear to be singing. The steel pot helmets are of the 1935 model, introduced under the Third Reich and used throughout the next decade to replace the World War I-era “coal scuttle” type worn earlier. Note, too, the stereotypic castle atop the hill, the shepherd at lower-right with his dog, and the trio of Stuka dive bombers in flight at upper-right.

Charcoal sketch of SS Trooper Near Kiev, Russia, 1941 by artist H. Steyr. This was in the summer of the first of four years of brutal war against the Soviet Union during which SS Einstazgruppen/Special Action Groups—organizational cousins of the Waffen SS—slaughtered Jews, Gypsies and other “racial undesirables.” After the war, veterans of the Waffen SS feigned to deny all connection with that aspect of the war. This trooper wears a field smock and carries binoculars, stick grenade, ammunition belt, dispatch case and standard-issue bolt-action rifle at sling arms. He’s a private.

French Volunteers in the Waffen SS 1944, again by artist Engelhardt-Kyffhauser.

Portrait of an SS Man as Soldier by artist Roloff. In his belt are a pair of famous “potato masher” stick grenades, and he also wears in his buttonhole the black-white-red ribbon of the Iron Cross. The ancient Germanic runes for SS/Schutzstaffel/Security Forces are on the right collar tab, and his rank as an acting corporal is on the left.

Two SS Soldiers by artist O. Anton. As his fellow troopers cover him, this soldier stands up to throw a grenade at the enemy to his front. Over his camouflage smock he wears a belt with ammunition pouches on either side of the eagle-and-swastika buckle, all worn over a standard-issue field gray uniform.