

CHARLES D. MELSON

Studies in Battle

OPERATION KNIGHT'S MOVE



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GERMAN AIRBORNE RAID AGAINST TITO, 25 MAY 1944

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This narrative began as a staff study of the use of a Marine force reconnaissance company as an airborne raiding force and took form as a conference paper for the Society of Military History. Most direct quotes in this book are from wartime Axis reporters or documents, with a resulting German viewpoint. References were in English, German, and Serbo-Croatian with the predicaments in spelling and expression this entailed—my usage was for clarity rather than technical accuracy. Maps and pictures are credited with their source and the primary records are held by the institutions named. Specific documentation is found in the articles and books cited in the notes.

The story is the result of research over the last 35 years with obligations to individuals and institutions to include: T. C. Charman and James S. Lucas, Imperial War Museum; James N. Eastman Jr., Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center; Mark Evans, Naval Historical Center; F. O. Finzel, Bund der Deutsche Fallschirmjaeger; Dr. Haupt and Herr Meyer, Bundesarchiv; Andrew Mollo, Historical Research Unit; James E. Mrazek, Colonel, U.S. Army (Retired); George A. Petersen, National Capital Historical Sales; Agnes F. Peterson, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace; Ruzica Popovitch, Library of Congress; John J. Slonaker, U.S. Army History Research Collection; Paul Sofranak, Chief Warrant Officer, U.S. Marine Corps; Dieter Stenger, U.S. Marine Corps Museum; Dianne S. Tapley, U.S. Army Infantry School Library; H. L. Theobald, Cabinet Office Historical Section; Barbara P. Vandegrift, George C. Marshall Research Foundation Library; Milan Vego, U.S. Naval War College; Gene F. Wilson, Central Intelligence Agency; Robert Wolfe and William H. Cunliffe, National Archives and Records Service; Bruce I. Gudmundsson, Marine Corps University; and the Vojni Istoriski Institut of the former Yugoslavia. The Director of Marine Corps History, Dr. Charles P. Neimeyer, encouraged this project from its origins as a conference paper. Credit for the excellent editing and layout goes to senior editor Kenneth H. Williams, acquisitions editor Dr. Stephen S. Evans, manuscript editor James M. Caiella, and visual information specialist W. Stephen Hill.

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Introduction

In Croatia troops of the Army and Armed-SS commanded by General [Lothar] Rendulic, supported by strong German bomber and ground attack plane formations, raided the center of Tito's bandit groups and smashed it after a heavy struggle lasting for days. According to preliminary reports, the enemy lost 6,240 men. In addition, numerous weapons of all kinds and many supply installations were captured. In this fighting the 7th SS-Mountain Division 'Prinz Eugen,' under the command of SS-General [Otto] Kumm, and the 500th SS-Parachute Battalion, commanded by SS-Captain [Kurt] Rybka, excellently proved themselves.

So announced the German Supreme High Command of the Armed Forces (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* [OKW]), but whatever headlines this generated were lost in the news of the Allied D-Day invasion of France and the opening of the second front in Europe.¹

A unique operation, both for obscurity and daring, was the effort to oust Balkan guerrilla chief Josip Broz, "Marshal Tito." With *Unternehmen Rösselsprung* (Operation Knight's Move), the late Yugoslav president's career might have been ended by the Germans on his 52d birthday, 25 May 1944. On that day, Axis forces executed an airborne raid on the Yugoslav Partisan (communist-led anti-fascist resistance movement) high command at Drvar, Bosnia, that almost succeeded in eliminating Tito.



M. J. Slade (Imperial War Museum)

The hunted: Josip Broz "Tito" in 1944. This photograph of the Partisan leader with his dog "Tiger" at the Drvar, Bosnia, headquarters was taken by British combat cameraman Sergeant M. J. Slade, who was captured during the German raid shortly after the picture was taken.

Today, it provides an example of using light infantry in low-intensity or special operations, with unforeseen consequences similar to those experienced by others against irregular opponents.

German airborne employment after the large-scale invasion of Crete in 1941 was confined to small-scale actions for limited objectives. These took place using parachutists and gliders as reinforcements on the island of Sicily, seizing the island of Elba, at Monte Rotondo to capture the Italian general headquarters, a raid at Gran Sasso to free former Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini, an airborne assault to

seize the island of Leros, the raid in Bosnia to capture guerrilla leadership, and for advance force operations behind the lines during the Ardennes offensive. A U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College paper noted that some seven parachute and glider combat operations were mounted from 1943 until 1945, but only one was greater than reinforced battalion strength. The author concluded: “none of them had any real significance to the course of the war.”² What follows is the story behind the missed OKW headline of 6 June 1944.³

Knight's Move

The Balkan countries of Yugoslavia and Greece were beaten by conventional attack that followed a stalled Italian invasion of Greece and German leader Adolf Hitler's perceived betrayal of a non-aggression agreement by Yugoslavia to secure the flanks for the subsequent German invasion of the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia was invaded by the Axis in 1941, and occupied primarily by Italy and other Axis partners through

The cabinet and supreme command of the Partisans included those pictured here. Front, left to right: Dr. Ribnikar, Minister of Information; Col Kardelj, Tito. Back, left to right: MajGen Yovanovich, Chief of Staff; Radonja, Tito's aide; Cholakovich, Secretary of the Anti-Fascist Council; Kocbek, Minister of Education; and LtGen Zujevich.

M. J. Slade (Imperial War Museum)



1943. It was broken into various zones of occupation and puppet states benefitting the bordering nations of Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. The province of Slovenia was annexed by Germany, Serbia was occupied by the Germans with a collaborationist government, Italy annexed Dalmatia while also occupying Albania, and an independent Croatia existed under a fascist government. In addition, Greece and its islands were subjugated by both Italy and Germany. For the Germans, the Balkans—known as the Southeast Theater—was a backwater of secondary importance to the conduct of war against the major Allied powers. Their goal was to ensure the security of rail, river, and road routes of strategic minerals and oil flowing to Germany and maintain access to African and Eastern Fronts.

Like most campaigns not handled speedily, the Southeast became a steady drain on military resources contributing to the final Axis defeat. Second-rate troops, new formations, reservists, and various police forces were employed in the theater with no ultimate goal except exploitation and maintaining order. As the war progressed, incipient revolt and internal politics became more of a factor causing increasing—but never enough—numbers of Axis forces to be devoted to internal security. This was made worse by savage reprisals, the lack of any enlightened occupation policy, and the need to shore up local collaborators in Croatia and Serbia. The danger from internal resistance was not acknowledged until 1943, brought on by defeats in Africa and Russia and Italy's defection from the Axis. By 1944, German resident forces in the Balkans were faced with the dual problem of Allied invasion

GERMAN DIVISIONS IN YUGOSLAVIA, MID-1944* (*see map p. 4*)

Heer (Army) Divisions

1st Mountain Division: "The premier German division in Yugoslavia. Part of German prewar army, made up of Bavarians from mountain regions. Very mobile in rough terrain. It provided the mobile force in all the anti-partisan operations."

98th Division: "An excellent division but worn out in Russia. Sent to Yugoslavia for rebuilding."

118th Light or *Jaeger* Division : "A division of Austrians, originally the 718th Division, re-designed and upgraded for anti-partisan warfare in April 1943 as the Germans became more serious about the partisan war. Served virtually the entire war in Yugoslavia. Good quality."

181st Division: "A solid division. Raised in 1940."

264th Division: "A second-class unit. Served in Yugoslavia for most of war."

369th Division: "Consisted mainly of Croatians with German cadres. Successor in name but not in quality of the 369th Croatian Infantry Regiment. Unreliable. (The original regiment was the 'Croatian Army Legion' consisting of Croatian volunteers in the German army. It was attached to the 100th *Jaeger* Division and was destroyed at Stalingrad.)

373d Division: "Another division of Croatians with German cadre. Poor performance."

392d Division: "Yet another division of Croatians with German cadre, but this one performed well."

1st Cossack Division: "Composed of Russian Cossacks. Apparently performed well. Fought to the end. Members captured by the Soviets and executed after the war."

Schutzstaffel (Waffen or Armed-SS) Divisions

7th Prinz Eugen: "A mountain division made up of ethnic Germans from the Balkans. Established in 1942 specifically for partisan warfare. Fought well but committed many atrocities."

13th Handschar: "Composed of Croatian and Bosnian Moslems (!). Unreliable and committed many atrocities. Transformed into a battle group of ethnic Germans later in the war and fought to the end."

21st Skanderbeg: "Composed of Albanians. Unreliable. Disbanded and folded into 7th SS."

*Quoted from Cancian, *Parameters*, Table 2, page 80:

"The higher the division number in the German army, generally, the lower quality. High numbered divisions were either raised late in the war when resources were scarce or were designed for limited purposes.

One insight from this table is that observers of the current civil war should be cautious when talking about the 'good' Croats and Bosnians and the 'bad' Serbians as if these were eternal verities. This may be today's perspective, but World War II looks very different. (Note the number of collaborationist Croat and Bosnian units.) These Balkan conflicts have been going on for centuries. Rather than characterizing the good guys and bad guys, observers should focus on good and bad behavior."

from the Eastern and Western Fronts and full-fledged guerrilla war in the rear against their bases and communications lines.

At the same time, the Germans were no longer able to mount offensive antiguerrilla operations although some six major efforts, by communist count, had been undertaken to date. Large-scale winter offensives were

not possible because of the shortage of trained units and the Partisan's skill at evading these sweeps. Instead, the Germans had to change their tactics from "search and destroy" efforts to surprise "attack and pursuit" operations.⁴ German antiguerrilla doctrine had evolved from ad hoc beginnings to a more established doctrinal structure.



Defensive efforts, or police measures, were oriented on lines of communications—railways and rail traffic, roadways and road traffic, waterways and water traffic; administrative and communications facilities; and agriculture or natural resources. In this, all “troops must be able to conduct actions against bands, even supply units, technical units, and security units.”⁵ A proviso from field service regulations qualified that “no more manpower than is absolutely necessary” was committed to the rear areas, and particularly cited protection against Partisan bands: “All troops, troop billets, traffic and economic installations as well as war important plants have to protect themselves and to be protected against attacks by bands through security measures.”⁶ A note of caution was added: “The securing and guarding of the land and of all important installations . . . makes careful reconnaissance and planning for all guerilla actions, but does not make the actions impossible. There is no countermeasure . . . that cannot be rendered useless through skillful adaption to it.”⁷ In fact, a majority of the defensive effort was involved with rear area security.⁸

Offensive efforts, or military operations, needed the aggressive deployment of “hunter” units, surprise attacks or pursuit, and encirclements by major commands.⁹

a) Reconnaissance-strike operations represented the most common action engagements. Deployment of patrols against bands: “Small, but especially effective units, composed and armed as *jagdkommandos* [hunter or combat patrols], are especially suitable to impede the formation of bands and to disrupt band communications.”¹⁰

Hunter patrols were formed with local assets from the army rear area, security, and other divisions endangered by guerrillas. These were platoon to company size. Internal structure called for four squads each with an officer in charge, one local scout in civilian clothes, and all armed liberally with light machine gun, semi-automatic and automatic rifles, sniper rifles, and grenades. Mobility was by foot, draft animals, skis, and sledges. Provided with radios, hunter units were intended to operate for up to two weeks without resupply.¹¹ A post-war German special forces officer described hunter or ranger units as “men who knew every possible ruse and tactic of guerrilla warfare. They had gone through the hell of combat against the crafty partisans in the endless swamps and forests of Russia.”¹² It was a kind of warfare that could not be rushed and required time to develop opportunities to defeat the guerrilla.

b) Attack-pursuit operations were used as opportunity offered, specifically destruction through surprise attack and hunt: “If forces or time are not sufficient for encirclement or difficult ground makes it impossible, the bands, even without previous encirclement, have to be attacked, defeated and hunted until they are completely destroyed.”¹³ Two approaches were used, one where reconnaissance was possible before hand allowing the placement of blocking forces and the other where a frontal attack had to be launched because of a lack of time or restricted terrain.¹⁴ The goal was to surprise the guerrillas while on the march or before constructing base camps. A quick attack would cause them to fight or flee and then to be hunted down and destroyed as a splinter group (“One has to put up with the es-

cape of individual isolated groups”). The hunt was a more elaborate version of the attack-pursuit, with the goal of overtaking the guerrillas carried out by fast moving forces. The primary target was guerrilla leadership.¹⁵

c) Encircle-annihilation operations were preferred but the most demanding in terms of material and personnel. “This is the main battle technique and at the same time the most efficient means for eliminating the band menace. It requires larger forces, but leads most decisively to success.”¹⁶ The Germans believed that this maneuver was the most comprehensive and should be attempted in all cases, even against small guerrilla groups: “The basic maxim of this technique is: To cut off every escape route and to annihilate all parts of the band.”¹⁷ According to Peter Lieb, this tactic needed first rate units such as the 7th SS or 1st Mountain Divisions to carry out in broken terrain.¹⁸

To accomplish this, a number of variations were analyzed to insure success.

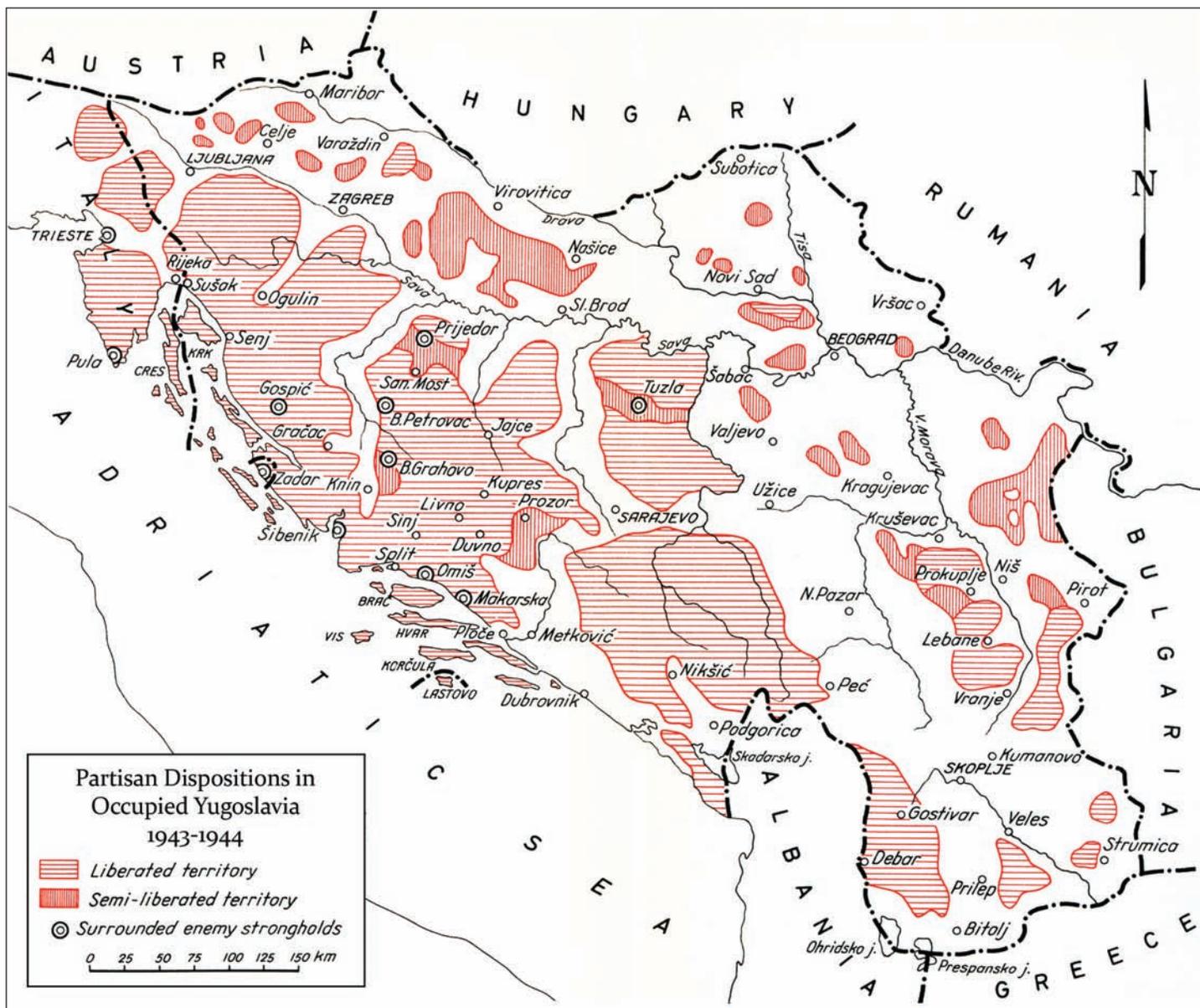
Preparations and preliminary movements were needed to bring forces in place. Each had to move from assembly areas at different rates to arrive at the encirclement line at the same time. Ground had to be occupied and positions prepared without revealing the intent of the maneuver to the guerrillas. Thin lines were not sufficient, conventional defense arrangements were needed to include advance outposts, main lines of resistance, adequate artillery, and mobile reserves. Air support was of more limited value because of the fleeting nature of the target or the possibility of compromising surprise.¹⁹

Critical to this was an accurate picture of the “Bandit” or “Red” situation from *Wehrmacht* (Unified Armed Forces) and *Shutzstaffel* (SS) and police intelligence and security agencies in the Southeast. Conflicts within German military, police, and civilian intelligence communities made this difficult at times with competing resources and priorities. “Who, what, when, where, and

Allied missions in 1944 at Drvar included visiting journalists to publicize to the outside world the little-known Partisan effort. Interviewing the minister of information are, from right to left, Fowler, Slade, Pribichevich, and Talbot. Note the arms and uniforms of the escort.

M. J. Slade (Imperial War Museum)





Vojnoizdavaki Zavod

how” were the essential elements of information sought by these diverse organizations through special patrols, infiltrators, radio intercept, and air reconnaissance. At the same time the Yugoslav Resistance and Allies were engaged in a similar effort to divine Axis intentions.

While lacking facts, over time the Germans built up a picture of the ever-changing opposition. Of the two major guerrilla movements in Yugoslavia, the communist Partisans were considered the major threat. They were now seen by the Germans as the main insurgent force with the recognition of

Tito by the Allies at the Tehran Conference the previous year. Royalist Serbian *Chetniks* maintained an uneasy accord with the Axis and Allies while the Partisans grew to a size able to survive in large areas by themselves, including transportation and communications facilities. German estimates of total numbers varied (possibly 120,000 Partisans by 1944, the majority being in Croatia, with another 60,000–70,000 Chetniks, mainly in Serbia), not all of which were communist and few were armed. Partisan organization had matured from armed small groups to people's liberation army units of battalion size, and then into mixed "proletarian" brigades with the goal of division-size commands. Communist commissars were paired with leaders of units down to the company level emphasizing the political as well as military nature of the resistance. The SS and police minimized these developments, reporting the Partisans have "the cheek to call a battalion a brigade, and we fall for it straight away. A brigade? In Heaven's name. The military mind at once imagines a group of six or eight thousand men. A thousand vagabonds who have been herded together suddenly become a brigade. Divisions and corps are knocked to pieces by us, and the man [Tito] forms them up again every time."²⁰

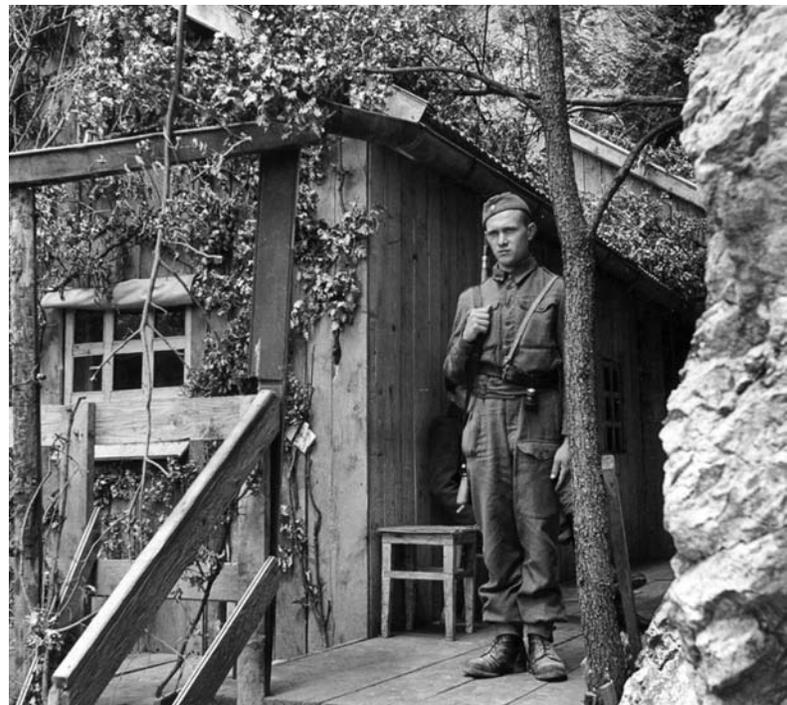
By German standards, the laws of war did not apply to guerrilla combatants or supporters. Reprisal killings were the norm rather than exception although treatment of prisoners varied with the situation. Partisan uniforms and weapons were mixed, with an active effort being made to supply them by the Allies by this time (although a communist movement, no material support arrived from the Soviet Union). Yugoslav,

Italian, German, British, or civilian clothing was in use with Yugoslav national colors, Soviet stars and rank stripes being reported. All could quickly be discarded to blend in with the local population if required. Communist combat methods were diverse, conforming to the principles of guerrilla fighting faced since the war's beginning. Guerrilla actions were at night, with the daytime spent hidden below ground or under tree cover.

The Germans experienced three main types of combat actions: ambush by small groups to acquire arms and ammunition, open attacks by larger forces to wipe out smaller Axis units for prestige and plunder, and the occupation of remote base areas for

Tito's cave quarters outside of Drvar. Well hidden, it was guarded by a select Partisan bodyguard. The Germans did not have this precise location and underestimated the resistance they encountered.

M. J. Slade (Imperial War Museum)





M. J. Slade (Imperial War Museum)

Partisans located in Drvar at the time of the German raid included anti-fascist youth congress members shown here. Note the mix of uniforms and weapons from varied sources.

political and logistical support. When struck or surrounded by German forces, the normal Partisan response was to break up and disperse. Scattered, the groups returned to hit-and-run tactics. As such, some German estimates felt the “combat effectiveness of the Red formations is limited” in one-on-one encounters. Read one report, “The masses are composed of farmers and workers who were misled by propaganda and or fled to the woods for fear of reprisals and extermination measures.”²¹

The Supreme Commander, Southeast intelligence staff held a more ominous view of the situation in 1944: “The classification of the enemy as bandits and fighting against them as bandit warfare is entirely incorrect.”²² A detailed look at the Partisan movement by German *Luftwaffe Kriegsbereichter* (war correspondent) Heinz Schwitzke, concluded the Partisan “state consisted of an impressive number of

minister-presidents, cabinets and marshals, although it was not as vast as the exaggerating enemy press would like us to believe. These bandits, who played so carelessly with the fate of the people, have always excelled in making the most of circumstances which were not clear cut.”²³ This referred to Partisan efforts in exploiting the differences within the Axis camp that allowed them to survive despite previous efforts to wipe them out. The communist leadership remained a cipher to the Germans, who did not know if Tito was an acronym, a committee, or even a woman! “Tito” was the cover name used by Josip Broz, the general secretary of the Yugoslav Communist Party. A metal worker, Austro-Hungarian World War veteran, and long-time communist, he worked against the royal Yugoslav government until the German invasion of Russia and Stalin’s Communist International call to arms

SIGNIFICANT PARTICIPANTS

Josip Broz “Tito”: Born in 1892 at Kumrovec, Croatia-Slavonia. A machinist, he was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army in World War I. Wounded, he was captured by the Russians, and joined the Bolsheviks during the revolution. Returning to Yugoslavia, he was an active communist in the inter-war years. From 1941 until 1945 he led the Yugoslav people’s army, the national committee of liberation, as well as a provisional “democratic” government. Wartime leaders with him in 1944 included Vladimir Bakaric, Milovan Dilas, Edvard Kardelj, Ivan Milutinovic, Aleksandar Rankovic, and Svetozar Vukmanovic. Tito ended the war a Marshal of Yugoslavia and was the post-war Prime Minister, President, and Secretary General of the Non-aligned Movement. He held some 119 awards or decorations from 60 countries. He died in 1980.

Lieutenant General Ernst von Leyser: Born in 1889 at Steglitz, Germany. An army officer from 1909, he served in World War I, then as a policeman. He held regimental through corps-level assignments in the West and East. A general officer from 1941, he commanded the XV and XXI Mountain Corps in the Southeast Theater from November 1943 until April 1945. Awarded the Iron Cross I and II class, German Cross, and Knight’s Cross. Convicted of charges at Nuremberg, he died in 1962.

General Lothar Rendulic: Born in 1887 at Wiener Neustadt, Austria. An Austro-Hungarian army officer from 1910, he served in World War I, and earned a doctor of law degree. A general officer from 1939, he held division and higher postings in the West and

East. He was appointed commander of the 2d Panzer Army from July 1943 through January 1945. He commanded forces in Finland and Norway until 1945. Awarded the Austrian War Merit Cross and Medal, Wound Badge, Iron Cross I and II class, German Cross, and Knight’s Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords. Convicted of charges at Nuremberg, he died in 1971.

SS-Captain Kurt Max Rybka: Born in 1917 at Darmstadt, Germany. Rybka was an officer of the Armed-SS. A second lieutenant in 1940, he served in a motorcycle reconnaissance replacement unit and was then assigned Battle Group “North” in 1941. Wounded, he returned to the reconnaissance replacement unit until returning as a first lieutenant to SS-Division “North” in 1942. Promoted to captain and appointed to command the SS-parachute battalion in 1944. Wounded severely during Knight’s Move, his injuries kept him in training duties thereafter. Awarded the Finnish Cross of Liberty, Wound Badge, Iron Cross I and II class, and Honor Roll Clasp. He died in 1959.

Field Marshal Maximilian von Weichs: Born in 1881 at Dessau, Germany. An army officer from 1901, he served in the cavalry and on staff in World War I. A general officer from 1933, he distinguished himself in campaigns in Poland, the West, the Balkans, and the East. Promoted to field marshal, he was appointed to command all German forces in the Southeast Theater (Army Groups E and F) from August 1943 until March 1945. Awarded the Iron Cross I and II class, and the Knight’s Cross with Oak Leaves. Too ill to stand trial at Nuremberg, he died in 1954.

against the Germans. With his role in the resistance now becoming known to the Axis and Allies, the key part he played was recognized. He was described by *SS-Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler as “a consistent man. . . . He has really earned his title of marshal. When we catch him we shall kill him at once. You can be sure of that. He is our enemy.”²⁴

O rigins of the Raid

By January 1944, the German military structure in the Balkans was singular. As Supreme Commander, Southeast, Field Marshal Maximilian Baron von Weichs' Army Group F controlled all German forces in Yugoslavia and Albania. He also controlled Army Group E in Greece; in effect placing Army Group F in the position of being the headquarters to which all German forces in the Balkans answered. As subordinates in Yugoslavia and Albania, Army Group F had the 2d *Panzer* (Armored) Army headquartered in Kraljevo and Military Commander, Southeast in Belgrade. Both commands were misnamed, since the 2d *Panzer* Army had no armored divisions and should have been more properly titled the 2d Mountain Army. Military Commander, Southeast was the area commander for Serbia with the dual role of Army Commander, Serbia. Available tactical units included a Bulgarian corps of 4 divisions, 4 German (*Heer* and *Waffen-SS*) corps with 11 infantry, 1 cavalry, and 2 mountain divisions as well as headquarters troops. In support were some 50 static garrison battalions; the *Luftwaffe* (Air Force) with around 140 aircraft in Belgrade,

Zagreb, and Mostar; and the *Kriegsmarine* (Navy) operating a small fleet of patrol craft from Trieste.

The Germans had sought to eliminate Tito personally from January 1944 under Hitler's orders. Efforts were made by Brandenburg special forces with the 2d *Panzer* Army that focused on infiltrating turncoats into Tito's headquarters to lead in German units or to assassinate him themselves. Among the scenarios considered were booby-trapped documents or supplies left on the bodies of dead “Allied” operatives. The use of an airborne raiding force had been brought up against locations at Jajce and Vis in January and February. This planning led to the prospect of seizing Tito with an airborne coup that had apparently been hatching at OKW for some time, spurred by the example of the release of Mussolini the year before. To date, nothing had come of the schemes. These efforts were often at odds with the internal structure of the *Abwehr* (military intelligence) that split intelligence and special operations functions, its Brandenburg special forces now coming directly under OKW, and the similar confused authority within Himmler's SS and police special forces under then SS-Major Otto Skorzeny who pursued parallel tasks.²⁵

Facing well-armed and numerous guerrillas, Army Group F remained all but on the defensive by the opening months of 1944. Two of its German divisions had been moved to Italy and another four had been dispatched to Hungary. Von Weichs was presented with the dual problem of Allied invasion and full-fledged guerrilla attacks against his rear areas, including strategic lines of communications to Germany. Local



Vojni Istoriski Institut

Tito Reward Flyer.

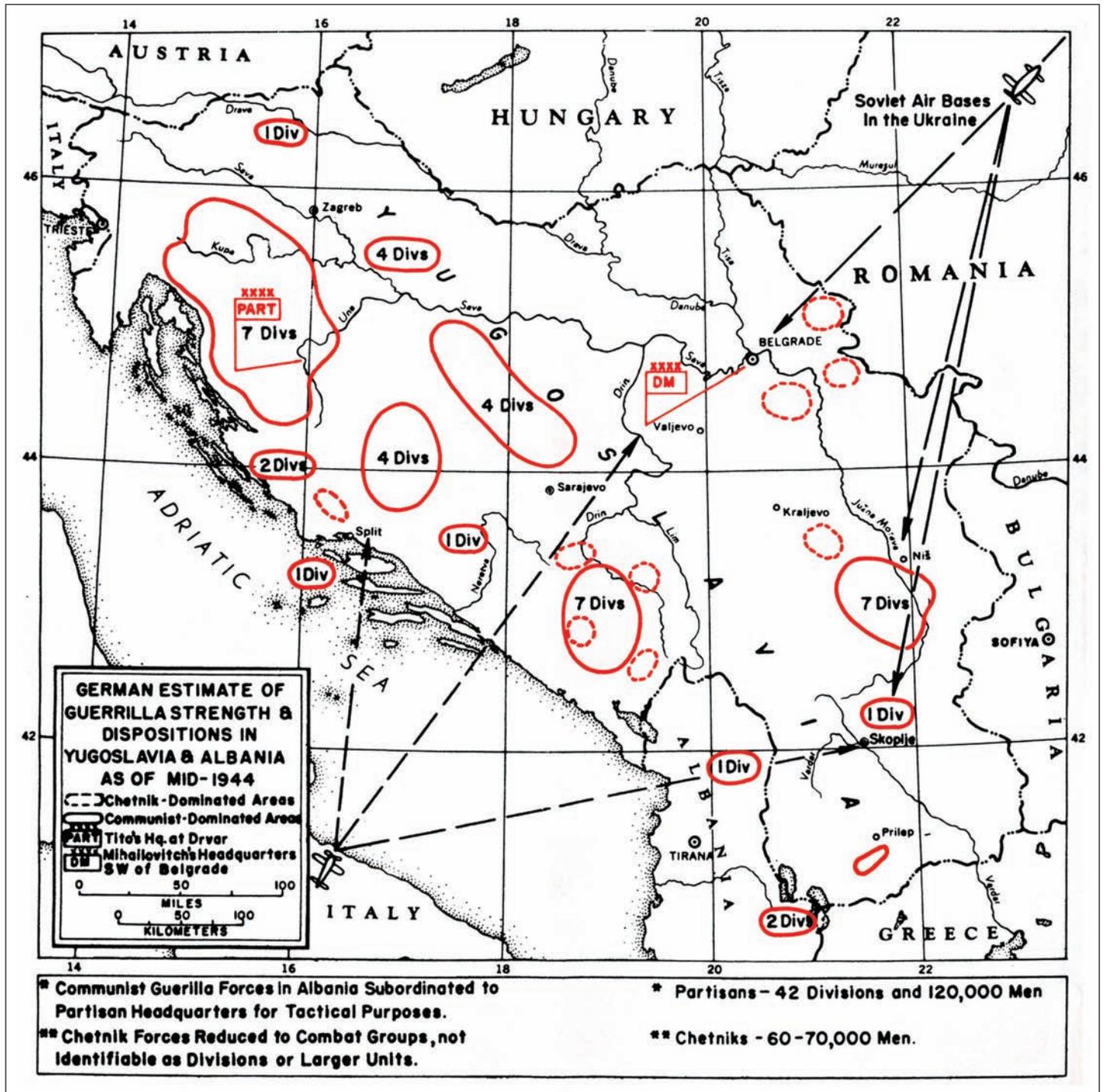
operations met with some success, but the center of the Partisan movement in the Knin-Jajce-Bihac-Banja Luka area was a refuge to which these withdrew when German pressure became too great in any particular location. Tito's political and military headquarters in Bosnia had been transformed from a secret base in liberated territory to a rapidly expanding complex of logistics, communications, and Allied missions. The need for Allied support and political recognition had overcome the Partisan requirement for safety provided by constant movement.

While rugged terrain and heavy snows gave the Partisans physical security, the Axis intelligence effort located their elusive prey.

Both OKW-*Abwehr* and SS-*Sicherheitsdienst* (SD [security service]) intercepted partisan communications and tentatively located Tito at Drvar in March 1944. Although the *Wehrmacht* and SS worked separately (the *Wehrmacht* normally left the policing of occupied territories to the control of the SS and police), together a cumulative picture of Partisan activities was built up. Infiltration efforts by the OKW-Brandenburg and SS-SD special forces placed agents into the heart of Partisan territory with some success in the first quarter of the year. Conventional air observation and strike reports located Allied landing and drop zones being marked by numerous small fires. Soon enough information was available for the Axis to attack when the weather favored movement.

Intelligence for the effort was prepared by Army Group F and 2d *Panzer* Army but was only distributed to tactical units who had a "need to know." This was reflected by the fact that the enemy situation stated in the operation orders was basically identical below the corps level.²⁶ As reported by Schwitske:

Not many comprehensive facts have ever existed of the very proud greater Serbian-Yugoslav-Bolshevist guerilla republic. But it nevertheless controlled a small part of the mountain region of the country. It is situated away from any significant habitation and important roads. It lies in the middle of the unending vastness of the . . . mountain region Therefore these shady characters could feel safe here, as it was not possible for any hostile army to advance on these valleys, without being observed. The



U.S Army

few deep embedded roads between rocks and impenetrable forests were easily controlled by a handful of men. For this reason it is possible for them to make themselves at home here and to gather into their depots anything that was dropped by parachute. Here they drilled their “armies,” entertained politicians or entertained themselves.²⁷

In March, the OKW operations staff estimated there were some 11 Partisan “corps” of 10,000 to 15,000 men each, 31 “divisions” of 2,000 to 3,000 men apiece, and 50 local “detachments.” Supreme Commander, Southeast reported that the Partisans “are operationally and tactically well led, equipped with heavy weapons and the constantly increasing numbers of units cannot be underestimated.” By April, Axis troops in Dalmatia, Montenegro, and Albania were perpetually involved in skirmishes with local insurgents on the mainland as well as repelling Allied and Partisan raids on off-shore islands. In Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia, the Germans had succeeded in pushing Partisans back north and west of the Drina River after scattered resistance. During the recent Operation May Pole they were believed to have taken heavy casualties. With the increased possibility of Allied invasion in early 1944, the Germans prepared an urgent operation against Tito’s headquarters to finish him as a guerrilla chief once and for all.²⁸

The Plan

On 6 May, von Weichs ordered General Lothar Rendulic’s 2d *Panzer* Army to plan for a drive into the Knin-Jajce-Bihac-Banja

Luka “iron triangle” of Bosnia. On 9 May, the OKW operations branch confirmed that the time was exceptionally favorable to strike Tito, whose Partisans had failed in an effort to establish a foothold in Serbia. This setback required von Weichs to assume the initiative as soon as possible, but in a form different from previous Balkan operations.

It was felt that a carefully staged direct attack on Tito’s headquarters would have the best chance of success. If the central control of Tito’s communications, administration, and Allied logistical support could be shattered or temporarily disrupted, this would be an achievement in itself. The aim was to eliminate the Partisan command and then hound the leaderless guerrilla units piecemeal to exhaustion and destruction. Everything depended upon good intelligence, surprise, and strong air support.²⁹ The execution of this task was passed to Lieutenant General Ernst von Leyser’s XV Mountain Corps at Knin. But OKW needed to assign a parachute battalion for this undertaking, as it would be dropped on the location of Tito’s headquarters. Reporter Schwitzke noted this would ensure surprise as,

At least until now, when suddenly, out of the same sky different goods rained down Up to this point the bandit town might have thought the attack tolerable, if uncomfortable. Attacks from our side must have been expected, though it would have been somewhat surprised by the numbers of planes flown from bases in Croatia. The town must now be realizing, and it should not come as a surprise, that we Germans do not always show our full capacity. But then something did



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The hunters: Germans who tried to capture Tito in Drvar on 25 May 1944 included this paratrooper. This SS-squad leader is identified by his sleeve stripes, binoculars, and submachine gun, as well as bandoliers holding grenades.

happen, which must have come as a surprise This was unforeseen and had never happened in Bosnia before.³⁰

As it was also necessary to neutralize Allied supply landing and drop zones, the Vth and XVth Mountain Corps would have to divert troops from other areas, as well as using Croat and Brandenburg special forces. While these disrupted the Partisan command, a number of motorized battle-groups would secure all access routes and converge on Drvar to relieve the parachute assault force. Once this occurred, units

would systematically clear the surrounding countryside to destroy supply dumps and material.³¹

By 13 May, von Weichs had identified the units to conduct what was now called Operation Knight's Move after a chessboard maneuver. Assigned for the operation was the 500th *SS-Fallschirmjäger* (Parachute [FSJ]) Battalion already located with Supreme Headquarters, Southeast. Under command of 27-year-old SS-Captain Kurt Max Rybka, it was formed the previous year as a national-level unit for "special security missions." Employed under the operational control of OKW for administration, training, and personnel, it was under the *Waffen-SS* (Armed-SS) whose members formed a fourth branch of the armed forces under the conglomerate organization of *SS-Reichsführer* Himmler. This thousand-man battalion was unique in the German military whose parachute units were normally part of the *Luftwaffe*. They were from a tough aggressive service trained by equally tough members of the parachute corps. While preparing for other aborted airborne attacks, it engaged in antiguerrilla operations in Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro before being tasked with Knight's Move, its first and only parachute assault. This was over the objection of Himmler, who had his own antiguerrilla plans in mind in competition with the *Wehrmacht*.³²

The battalion reflected a late war manpower mix of older veterans and lesser trained younger men, a mixture of tough experience and fanatical obedience. While the officers and non-commissioned officers were qualified volunteers, a portion of the men were under judicial probation

TEN COMMANDMENTS OF THE PARACHUTIST

1. You are the chosen ones of the German Army; you will seek combat and train yourselves to endure any manner of test. To you, the battle shall be fulfillment.
2. Cultivate true comradeship, for by the aid of your comrades you will conquer or die.
3. Beware of talking. Be not corruptible. Men act while women chatter. Chatter may bring you to the grave.
4. Be calm and prudent, strong and resolute. Valor and enthusiasm of an offensive spirit will cause you to prevail in the attack.
5. The most precious thing in the presence of the foe is ammunition. He who shoots uselessly, merely to comfort himself, is a man of straw who merits not the title of parachutist.
6. Never surrender. To you death or victory must be a point of honor.
7. You can triumph only if your weapons are good. See to it that you submit yourself to this law—first my weapon, then myself.
8. You must grasp the purpose of every enterprise, so that if your leader is killed you can fulfill it.
9. Against an open foe fight with chivalry, but to a guerrilla extend no quarter.
10. Keep your eyes wide open. Tune yourself to the topmost pitch. Be nimble as a greyhound, as tough as leather, as hard as Krupp steel, and so you shall be the German warrior incarnate.

(*Bewarungs*) and sought to redeem themselves in the eyes of the SS through daring or deadly effort with a “suicide commando” (*Himmelfahrtskommando*) in combat. A post-war *Bundeswehr* (Federal Defense Force) parachute commander observed: “The volunteers in the battalion not only had to get on with these probationary soldiers; they were also supposed to arouse their enthusiasm for special missions.” Most men were politically naïve, believing what they were told—that American and British troops were on the verge of social revolution and the Russians had tremendous numbers backed by commissars with pistols. The Partisans were “half naked gypsies who don’t even have enough ammunition!” This led the battalion to fight in the spirit of outraged righteousness that disregarded international law in the belief, and a command structure that demanded it, and that

Partisans were bandits subject to execution on capture.³³

The Airborne Raid

The Mission

On 19 May, reconnaissance aircraft photographed the objective area providing a detailed depiction of the Partisan and Allied positions. German agent reports continued to confirm Tito’s presence in Drvar. The parachute battalion prepared in secret but most men were not told the time and place until hours before the mission’s execution. Orders were hand-carried by officers and there was concern about the participation of Croat units leading to compromise.³⁴ Instructions issued on 20 May moved the 500th FSJ-Battalion by rail and truck to assembly areas with the possibility of an airborne assault.



Adolf Kunzmann (SS-PK)

Waffen-SS paratroopers constituted “an elite within an elite,” though controversial because of the use of probationary personnel. The Drvar raid was supposed to demonstrate their worth to critical audiences. Hard fighting and constant combat proved this, if not the rewards of victory.

Subordinate units with five days of supplies moved from billets in Kraljevo to staging areas on 21 May.

Security for the operation was intense and methodical. Airborne equipment was concealed and common infantry uniforms were worn. The normal practice prior to action was to remove jump badges, unit insignia, and pay books that might indicate who they were and what they might be up to. Transport Group One under SS-Lieutenant Haselwanter—consisting of 314 men from the battalion staff, SS-Lieutenant Korngiebel’s 3d Company, and one platoon

each from 2d and 4th Companies—went to the Gross Betschkerek airfield near Belgrade. To the Lucko and Cerklje airfield near Zagreb went Transport Group Two under SS-Lieutenant Witzemann. This was made up of 340 men from SS-Lieutenant Schmiedel’s 1st and SS-Lieutenant Witzemann’s 4th Companies with attached German Army or *Luftwaffe* personnel. From the higher headquarters came special forces detachments including Brandenburg and Bosnian irregulars (Army Lieutenant Dowe), a front reconnaissance troop (Army Lieutenant Zawadil), and an air landing liaison troop (*Luftwaffe* Captain Bentrup). At the Zalvzani airfield near Banja Luka was Transport Group Three under SS-Captain Obermaier consisting of 220 men of the Field Replacement Company and the bulk of SS-Lieutenant Kaulitz’s 2d Company along with additional supplies and the battalion rear party. The German Commander, Air Forces Croatia, provided transport units of Junkers Ju 52/3m transport aircraft and DFS 230 assault

SS insignia differentiated Luftwaffe from SS-paratroopers. Shown are the collar and sleeve devices used late in the war. These would have been absent from probationary soldiers.

National Capital Historical Sales



BATTALION ORGANIZATION AND EQUIPMENT

Organization

The battalion was organized based on existing *Luftwaffe* structure that depended upon the personnel-carrying capacity of transport aircraft and air-transportable gear. As such, one Ju 52 carried 12 parachutists (a squad plus two extra) and four arms containers, a flight of 3 Ju 52s carried a platoon, a 12-aircraft squadron moved a company, and a 53 aircraft group was needed for a full battalion. Glider transport introduced another dimension, with a single DFS 230 and tow aircraft needed to move a 10-man squad.

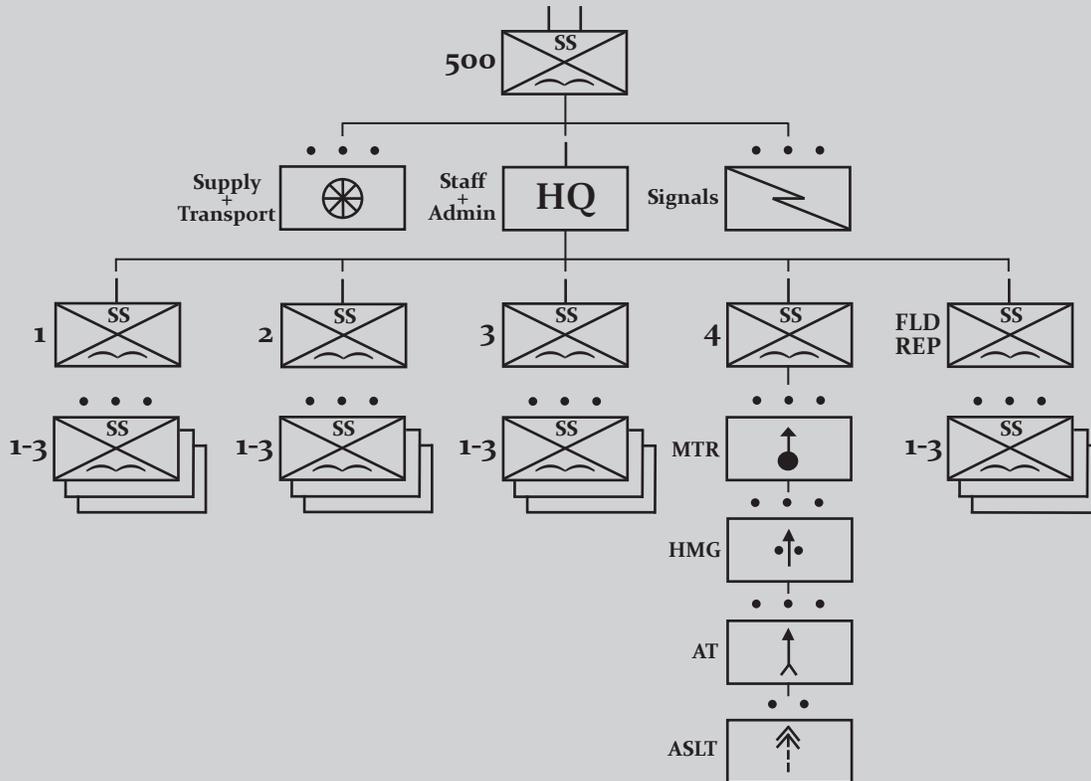
The parachute battalion had a staff and administration company with signals, motor transport, and parachute maintenance platoons, a weapons company, and three rifle companies. Rifle companies (164 men) had a headquarters (6 men), signals section (12 men), and three rifle platoons (108 men). Platoons had a headquarters (6 men) and three rifle squads (10 men each). Supernumeraries provided designated marksman, rifle grenadiers, and antitank assault men normally found at company level. The basic squad structure included a squad leader, second in command, 2 riflemen, and two machine gun teams of 3 men each. The weapons company consisted of a headquarters, signals section, machine gun, mortar, antitank, and assault platoons (each with a headquarters and

two sections). The parachute rifle companies, including the replacement company, had some 656 officers and men, another 200 in the weapons company, with 267 in the battalion headquarters for a force of 1,123 men at full strength. This should be balanced with the reality that organization for battle differed. The Germans estimated some 10 percent of the total remained behind from the battle echelon as a rear party (baggage train, supply troop, and parachute maintenance platoon) and another 2 percent would be injured on landing.

Equipment

Battalion weapon totals included some 72 light machine guns (MG 42s), 4 heavy machine guns (sMG 42s), 4 heavy mortars (sGrW 34s), 4 recoilless antitank guns (LG 40s), 4 portable flamethrowers, and a mixture of rifles and submachine guns. The battalion's usual 8 heavy machine guns were folded into both the antitank and assault platoons described. The parachute battalion depended heavily on radios (very-high frequency for internal communications, ultra-high and high frequency sets for external use) and was issued company- and platoon-level radios (*Tornisterfunkgerät* [portable radio] d2) and battalion and company sets (*Tornisterfunkgerät* b1). Ground transportation was from 131 or so trucks, motorcars, and motorcycles or equivalent number of horses and mules.

500th SS PARACHUTE BATTALION, MAY 1944



BATTALION COMMAND AND STAFF

Commander	SS-Capt Rybka	Rifle Platoons x 3	
Deputy	SS-Capt Obermaier	3d Company	SS-Lt Korngiebel
Adjutant	SS-Lt Mertely	Headquarters Section	
Medical Officers	SS-2dLt Dr. Hermann	Signals Section	
	SS-Lt Dr. von Helmersen	Rifle Platoons x 3	
Dental Officer	SS-Lt Dr. Wagner	4th Company	SS-2dLt Witzemann
Staff and Administration Company		Headquarters Section	
Signals Platoon		Signals Section	
Motor Transport Platoon		Mortar Platoon	
Parachute Maintenance Platoon		Heavy Machine Gun Platoon	
1st Company	SS-Lt Schmiedel	Antitank Platoon	
Headquarters Section		Assault Section	
Signals Section		Field Replacement Company	
Rifle Platoons x 3		Headquarters Section	
2d Company	SS-Lt Kaulitz	Signals Section	
Headquarters Section		Rifle Platoons x 3	
Signals Section			

Note: The battalion had 100 cars/trucks and 30 motorcycles.

gliders with Henschel Hs 126 or Junkers Ju 87 *Stuka* tow aircraft for the operation from Transport Wing 4 and Air Landing Wing 1. Once at the staging areas, all were to wait for further word from 2d *Panzer* Army. If nothing was heard within 48 hours, they were to telegraph or telephone 2d Army Chief of Staff General Helmuth von Grolman. Supplemental orders went into details but did not go into the purpose or location of the action.³⁵

The Order

On 21 May, von Weichs submitted the plan to OKW and it was approved by Hitler, who required a simultaneous air attack on Bosnia Petrovac. General Rendulic passed subordinates the directive the same day. This army order outlined the airborne assault and the subsequent relief and clearing operations in detail, allocating command to the *Luftwaffe* for the attack and to the Army ground units on link-up.³⁶ According to Rendulic: "The commands of the XVth Mountain Corps with strong motorized units, with parts of the 7th SS-Mountain Division and SS-[500th Parachute] Battalion, will advance with a number of task forces concentrically in the region of Petrovac-Drvar, will overcome the resistance of the Red forces and occupy the center of the Red command." The 500th would "parachute at dawn and overcome the resistance of the enemy command, putting them out of action."³⁷

Strong supporting efforts were planned and ordered by XVth Mountain Corps on 21 May:

◆ The 7th SS-Mountain Division would use a reinforced regimental battle group of the 13th SS-Mountain Regiment moving from

Jaice through Savici then on a broad front to engage Partisan formations and seize supply installations north and east of Drvar. It would then serve as a blocking position to prevent any guerrilla forces or staffs from escaping in this direction. A subordinate battle group reinforced by the 202d Tank Battalion would move from Banja Luka to occupy choke points at Kljuc used for Partisan movement. Another tank reinforced battle group of the 105th SS-Reconnaissance Battalion would occupy positions in the Livno Valley to prevent withdrawals to the south; a third battle group from the 369th "Devil" Division's Reconnaissance Battalion would move to the Glamoc Valley to stop withdrawals to the southeast. All available engineers would accompany these battle groups to secure road blocks and to restore bridges or culverts.

◆ The 373d "Tiger" Division would use reinforced regimental Battle Group Willam moving from Srb through Trubar to Drvar to relieve the parachute battalion. After destroying all facilities and supplies in Drvar, the battle group would attack toward Petrovac. A subordinate battle group of battalion size would occupy the Vrtoce area choke points. These battle or combat groups were to be heavily armed with artillery and engineers.

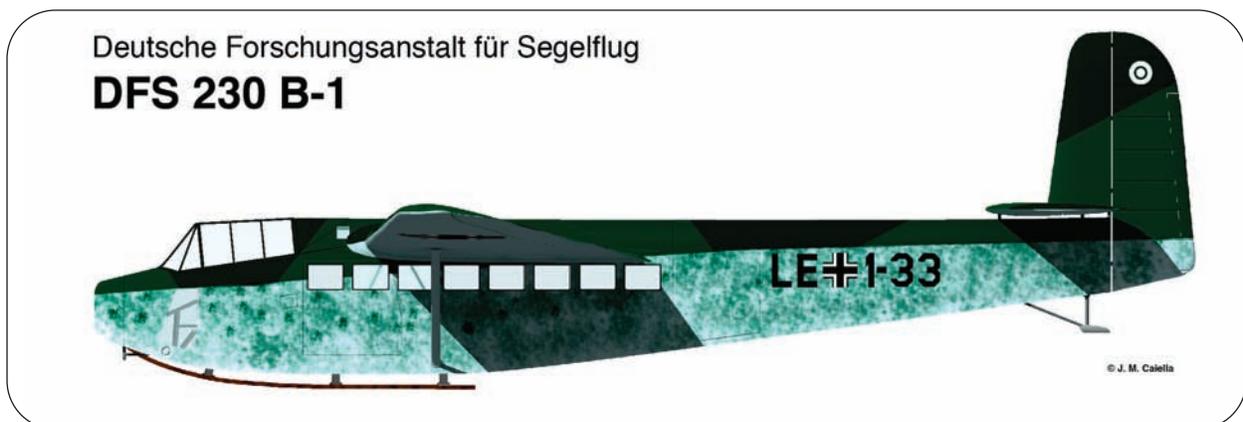
◆ The 92d Motorized Regiment with the 54th Reconnaissance Battalion and a regimental battle group of the Croat 2d Light Infantry Brigade would move from Bihac to capture Petrovac, destroying the supply facilities and airfields located there, and blocking enemy withdrawals in their direction. After accomplishing this, it would attack toward Drvar to link up with the



parachute battalion and Battle Group Willam.

♦ The 1st Brandenburg Regiment with Croat irregulars would advance from Knin to “conduct special operations” on the Prekaja-Drvar line. This concentric concentration of forces was consistent with anti-“bandit” doctrine, with the added surprise of the parachute battalion raid of the communist headquarters aimed to kill or capture the Partisan leadership. A limiting factor was that these forces had to break off any current operations, refit, begin planning, conduct reconnaissance, issue orders, establish communications, and move to assembly areas in time for X-day.

Parachute battalion orders were drawn up the evening of 23 May to be issued to the troops at the departure airfields the next day. Joint briefings were held at Agram with the air and ground units that gave precise instructions for flight paths, altitudes, and timings. The 2d *Panzer* Army provided a detailed annotated air photograph of Drvar to assign unit tasks. Because parachute transports or gliders by themselves could not carry the entire battalion in a single lift, a concept for employment was developed that used both aircraft types at the same time. The battalion split into three groups for the attack: some 314 men for a parachute assault, another 340 to go in by glider, and



AIRCRAFT, ARMS CONTAINER, GLIDER LOADS

The Junkers Ju 52/3m was the standard German transport aircraft. The three-engine, all-metal monoplane was flown by a crew of three, and had an estimated cruising range of 1,500 kilometers at 272 kilometers per hour. A rugged aircraft, it remained in military service well after the war in France and Spain.

Each Ju 52 carried a stick of 12 parachutists and four external arms containers for simultaneous air drop. The containers, each with its own parachute, weighed some 50- to 60-pounds empty and held loads up to 260 pounds. Each had a towing bar, lifting handles, and wheels to provide ground mobility. Color coded parachutes or markings identified containers by content: green-food, white or red-ammunition, blue-medical, yellow-petrol, oil, or lubricants. Colored markings also indicated units: green-headquarters, white-1st platoon, red-2d platoon, and yellow-3d platoon. Variations were seen in photographs—red cross for medical, lightning bolt for radios, and different alpha-numeric

lettering. A separate provision “bomb” canister existed for air delivery of supplies.

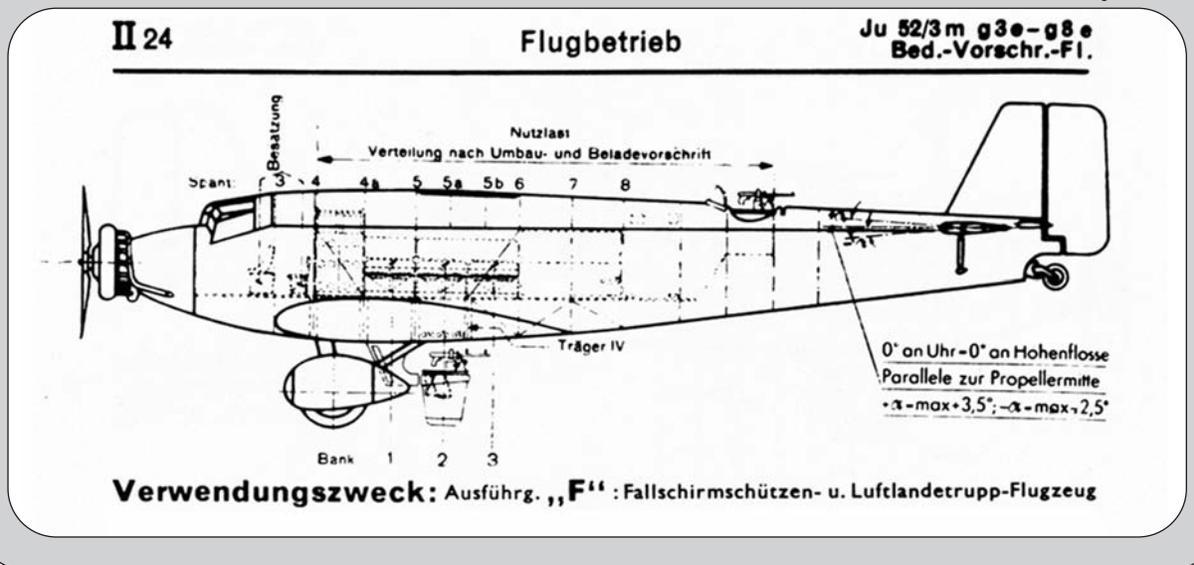
For Knight’s Move, combat and emergency rations were carried for the first day or so (“Five cans of meat and of bread will be issued. Under no circumstances will they be used prior to take off.”), with replacement of food and water from local sources expected. This was in part because mandated individual equipment loads averaged some 95 pounds per man or more for those with crew-served weapons. Basic ammunition allowances for planning: On operations, parachutists took all the munitions they could carry, independent of arms containers.

Pistol	18 rounds
Submachine gun (9mm)	690 rounds
Rifle (7.92mm)	200 rounds
Machine gun (7.92mm)	2,500-4,500 rounds
Mortar (81mm)	150 rounds high explosive

Plus hand and rifle grenades, land mines, demolitions charges, and antitank rockets

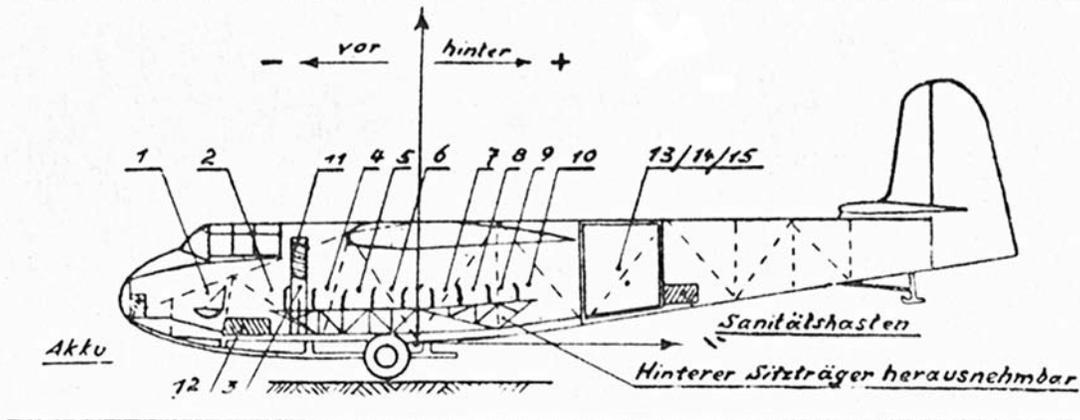
Ju 52/3m transport aircraft

War Department



Robert Hartwig
Abt. Flugzeugbau
Sonneberg-Thür.

Ladeplan
für die DFS 230 A-1



Verwendungs- und Beanspruchungsgruppe : P 3

War Department

DFS 230 transport glider

The *Deutsche Forschungsanstalt für Segelflug* DFS 230 was the standard German transport glider. It was of tubular steel construction covered with linen canvas. Each DFS 230 could carry a squad of 10 parachutists sitting one behind the other on a bench, as well as arms containers. After a high-speed dive from altitude, a parachute in the tail was released to slow the glider for landing, or nose-mounted braking rockets could be used for a short-field touchdown. Its cruising range depended upon that of the tow aircraft such as the Ju 52, Ju 87, or Hs 126. Glider usefulness ended after helicopters were fully developed.

The loading diagram of the DFS 230 shows

the location of 10 seats (1-10), rifle rack (11), boxes of ammunition (12), and position of a machine gun or radio set (13, 14, 15). There was a first aid kit in the rear of the fuselage and the last 4 seats could be removed. The maximum useful load was 2,834 pounds or just over 1¼ tons. For example, a headquarters section was 9 men, 6 rifles, and a radio; a machine gun section had 9 men, a heavy machine gun, 6 rifles, and 6 boxes of ammunition; a rifle squad consisted of 9 men, 6 rifles, a light machine gun, and 6 boxes of ammunition. After landing, the *Luftwaffe* pilot joined his passengers for their tactical assignment.

220 reinforcements to be dropped by parachute as a second wave for a total of 874 troops at the objective. Parachutists would seize the town and defend key terrain, while glider teams attacked specified enemy objectives. Both *Luftwaffe* and SS journalists and photographers went along

to document this decisive effort.³⁸ Attached intelligence specialists, translators, and communications personnel were to exploit captured prisoners and material on the spot to ferret out Tito, his leadership, and any Allied personnel. Information was to be obtained by any means and prisoners

presenting a threat or attempting to escape would be shot. Paratroopers were provided pictures of Tito, to be captured alive if possible and dead if not.³⁹ In his final order Rybka warned against the danger of Allied air attack, and closed by emphasizing that Drvar was the most important organizational and supply center of the “bandits” and that Operation Knight’s Move would commence at once. He concluded: “Don’t waste ammunition, don’t stop for the wounded. Press on to the objective.”⁴⁰

Dispersion to airfields near Belgrade, Banja Luka, and Zagreb required the task organized battalion to be in place by noon 24 May to await the commencement of events. At these guarded locations final orders were given and the news that they would be going into action—“X-day”—the

next morning, 25 May 1944. With this, loading plans were finalized and packing of parachutes and arms containers started at 1400. Last minute adjustments were coordinated with the transport units and the countdown began for H-hour. Pre-loading was completed of the estimated 31 transports and 34 gliders and tow aircraft needed for the initial waves. In addition, fighter and bombers crews were briefed and prepared to fly escort and attack missions. Recalled a *Luftwaffe* glider pilot, “In the quarters and on the airfield there was a lot of hustle and bustle on the eve of 25 May. Equipment, ammunition and weapons were checked and the tugs were lined up on the airfield ready for takeoff the next morning.”⁴¹

Preliminary operations were underway

Partisan formations survived by constant movement and avoiding having a fixed base that the Axis could attack. Drvar was to be an exception.

U.S. Army (National Archives and Records Administration)



from the air and the ground, unhindered or detected by enemy air forces. On 24 May, the 2d *Panzer* Army forward command post was located at Bihac and all units were in place with “perfect secrecy.” The parachute battalion and air units were set at departure airfields. The supporting combat groups moved into attack position as well, at Knin (65 kilometers from Drvar), Srb (25 kilometers from Drvar), and Bihac (54 kilometers from Petrovic, 29 kilometers from Drvar). Elements of the 7th SS-Mountain Division were last in place early the morning of the 25th, isolating the major avenues of approach to Drvar.⁴²

Partisan Picture

At this stage, a look at the other side of the hill is in order, concealed to the Germans by lack of access and nocturnal observation. The objective was located in the Unac River valley in the Dinaric Alps. The Jasenovac Mountains rose sharply to the north with high hills to the south. It was surrounded by evergreen and hardwood forests, giving way to alpine soil and karsts at altitude. The valley floor was 800 meters above sea level, with surrounding mountains reaching from 1,400 to 1,950 meters in elevation. Three major roads and a railroad led to the town, with the graded road coming from Petrovac turning into the town’s main street with sidewalks. Drvar was a large village with a former population of some 1,500 and had been a rural industrial center with cellulose or tobacco factories and extensive rail yards. These and the nearby villages were gutted in previous fighting. Houses were close together, with



M.J. Slade (Imperial War Museum)

Another view of Tito’s quarters and headquarters “cave” that would elude his attackers.

red tiled roofs and white walls, but only one-in-five was still intact. Though isolated by snow in the winter, spring weather had arrived by mid-May and it was warm and temperate in daytime. Fields and orchards, now green and cultivated with the coming spring, were defined by low stone walls and ditches.⁴³

The dual political and military function of Tito’s leadership saw the location in Drvar of the Supreme Headquarters of the National Army of Liberation and Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia, the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia, the Central Committee of the Yugoslav Communist Party; and various cultural and political organizations ranging from the anti-fascist youth organization to dancers from the Zagreb ballet. An estimated 800 guerrillas and 200 civilians were in the town which held Partisan



Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)

SS-paratroops in a Ju 52 transport enroute to Drvar, 25 May 1944. Note the cramped space and the exposed personal weapons they carry. Ammunition and supplies were carried in external arms containers dropped at the same time.

administrative, supply, and communications centers. Guerrilla defenses consisted of slit trenches against air attack and light anti-aircraft machine guns. An engineer unit, a 350-man escort battalion, and 100-person officer's training school were on the town's outskirts. Despite the small number of Partisans at Drvar, combat units were close at hand from the 1st and 5th Partisan Corps, conforming closely to the German estimate of 12,000 fighters.⁴⁴

In the vicinity of Drvar were three supporting landing fields and drops zones for communications and supplies from

Allied bases in Italy and Egypt.⁴⁵ Allied representation was by Brigadier Fitzroy H. R. MacLean's British Military Mission consisting of a number of radio operators and liaison officers headquartered in a ravine 3.2 kilometers south of town, with others assigned to Partisan units. (MacLean was in London at this time, but present were his deputy, Colonel Vivian Street, and the British Prime Minister's son, Major Randolph Churchill.) The Americans under Colonel George Kraigher had a smaller party just west of Drvar, an Army Air Forces weather station, and liaison teams with

combat units. Some 1.6 kilometers northwest of the town was Lieutenant General N. V. Korneyev's Soviet mission. The Russians operated separately from the British and Americans, who were providing the bulk of arms and equipment to the Partisans as well as air and maritime support where possible to keep German forces deployed in the Balkans and out of Western and Eastern Europe. Western reporters had recently arrived the month before to provide the first views from within the Partisan camp to the outside world. These included *Time's* Stoyan Pribichevich, Reuters' John Talbot, photographers U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer G. E. Fowler and British Army Sergeant M. J. Slade.⁴⁶

Crucial was the lack of information to the Germans that Tito's living quarters were not in Drvar, but located 1.6 kilometers to the north on the far side of the Unac River. In fact, he stayed daily in two different locations (the other site being Bastasi) rather than at the headquarters in the town. Located some 60 feet up a ravine in a wooded cliff, it could only be reached by a narrow path and up three flights of stairs. Working space was built into the mountain, with living quarters in a small hut at its entrance surrounded by a veranda overlooking the valley floor. The interior was a room lined with parachute silk, with desks, backed by a British ordnance map of Yugoslavia. It was well hidden, with additional camouflage provided by branches, and sentries stood guard over the single approach from below. As Tito recalled the situation, "The Allied landing in France was just around the corner. The Soviet Army was advancing at high speed and had already reached Romania. The Germans

feared an Allied landing here on the Adriatic. Our People's Liberation Army disturbed them greatly."⁴⁷ On the evening of 24 May, Tito, his deputy Edvard Kardelj, the journalists, mission representatives, and personal staff dined until late at the lodgings near Drvar. After dinner that night, Tito and Kardelj settled down to wait the morrow, Tito's 52d birthday.⁴⁸

Execution, X-Day

German operations were now entirely focused on western Bosnia for the time being. The XVth Mountain Corps recorded that the operation commenced on 25 May with pre-planned air attacks on Drvar and Petrovac, the first of some 440 sorties flown. This was heavy aviation support by Balkan standards. Motorized combat teams converged, three from the west and northwest; two from the east and southeast.⁴⁹

A member of Group Witzemann billeted near the airport at Agram recalled:

No one was permitted to leave the school or make any contact. We spent one night in the school and were awoken very early, around 0400 or 0500 hours, and the entire company had to gather in a school room. Here we first learned from our company commander which mission was flown. From two-tone glasses we could clearly see the aerial photograph of Drvar. On the aerial photograph we saw lines and drawn in points and each group and each platoon was precisely split up over the landing points, direction of attack, etc. . . . Tito was mentioned separately and he was to be taken

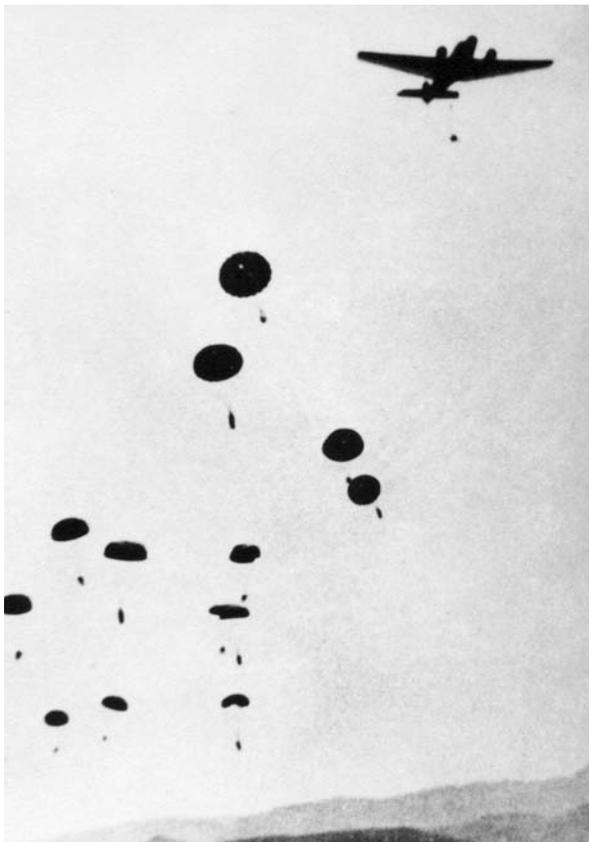
captive either alive or dead under all circumstances.⁵⁰

Similar presentations took place for the other two transport groups: Haselwanter at Belgrade and Obermaier at Banja Luka.

In the early morning hours, aircraft and gliders were inspected and the troops were loaded to begin the necessary but tedious marshalling for take off. German combat reporter Walter Henisch wrote: "A long row of transport gliders lay along the airfield, the tow-planes are ready to start. The morning breeze blew across the take-off runway, where the men of an SS-paratroop unit

H-hour over Drvar, 25 May 1944. Paratroops leave a Ju 52 transport over Drop Zones Red, Blue, and Green. Colored parachutes indicated ammunition and supplies.

Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)



stood around their section leader . . . With few words, the staff sergeant gave his orders to the glider pilot. Every minute of the landing operation was discussed and considered."⁵¹ Glider pilot Sieg recalled,

Long before the first light of day, the men of the SS-Parachute Battalion 500 moved to our position and awaited instructions to embark. After a short flight and mission briefing and synchronization of watches, the engines were started. At 0555, the machines towing the fully loaded transport gliders rumbled ponderously over the ground. After takeoff, the gliders' undercarriage was jettisoned at the end of the field.⁵²

Gliders flew off first, followed by troop transports. From the takeoff to initial touchdown was about an hour of flight time, most of which was spent gaining altitude and assembling in separate formations in the air. The tow aircraft and gliders flew high at 170 kilometers-per-hour, the transports were flown lower at 185 kilometers-per-hour. Initially the formations were loose because of the dark, but at first light the aircraft grouped into three- and five-aircraft flights. The Ju 52 "Iron Annies" had excellent navigational and flying qualities and there was no problem in locating Drvar. As the aircraft flew out of the dawn, the Dinaric Alps were visible in the cold air some 80 kilometers away.⁵³

In a transport, one journalist reported in third person:

Quarters in the Ju 52 were very cramped. It was difficult for him to get a look out of a window, but when he did get a look what he saw most was



Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)

Flights of Ju 52s maintained a specified flight pattern to allow squads, platoons, and sections to land as briefed on the objective. The goal was to overwhelm defenders with multiple attacks by Companies 1, 2, and 3. Weather at the time favored the airborne forces.

other Ju 52s. There were scores of them, all traveling the same route. By the same token, the thing he saw the least was British planes. There were none of them . . . our observer began to glimpse Ju 52s flying in the other direction. Those were planes that had dropped their loads and were heading home.

His thoughts turned to the old joke: “Lieutenant Y to his squad, ‘when I give the command to jump, push the man in front of you!’” True to the public affairs format, morale was high, the morning was beautiful, the countryside hilly and green, and the motor noisy. The engine noise prevented conversation and left each man alone with his own feelings.⁵⁴ In his glider, Henisch observed: “Above us fighter aircraft whiz ahead that will provide the introduction to the ‘Hell-dance.’ The paratroop transports are flying in broad formation before us.

They will jump right after the attack by the fighter aircraft.”⁵⁵

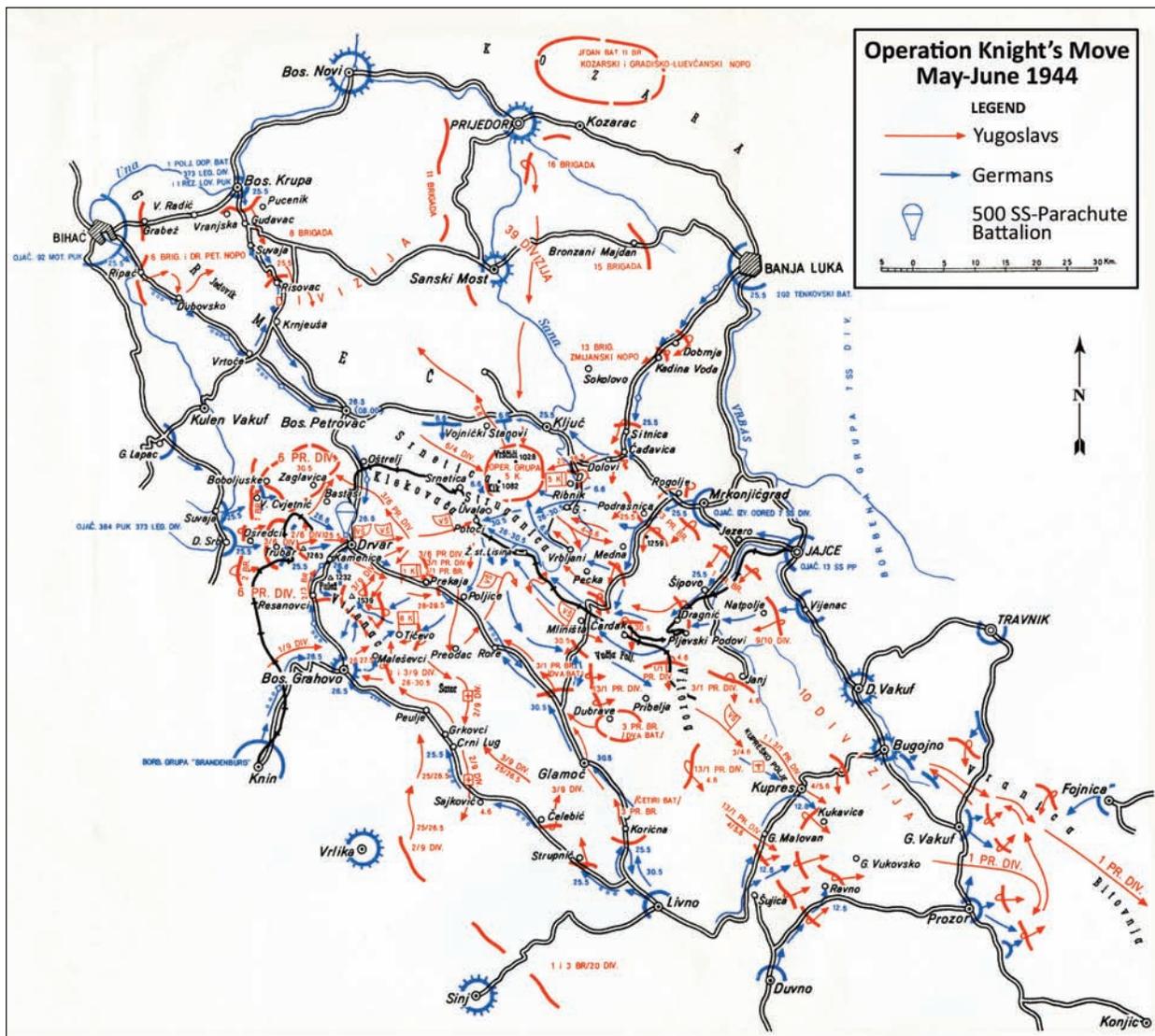
First escorting, then pulling ahead, were German and Croat Air Force aircraft tasked with the pre-assault bombardment. Just after daybreak at 0630, two Focke-Wulf Fw 190 *Würger* (Shrike) fighters flew up the Unac River valley on strafing runs, one flying high and the other low, with the aim of disrupting the Partisans. These were followed by some 15 Ju 87 *Stuka* dive bombers that orbited the town and proceeded to bomb and strafe it and the immediate locale, particularly suspected antiaircraft positions. For some 30 minutes, “very heavy low-level dive bomber attack on predetermined objectives” took place, reported one observer.⁵⁶ A number of fires were started that mingled smoke with haze, hindering accurate bomb damage assessment that was reported as good by the flight crews.

On board an Italian-built Caproni

At the drop zone, clearing parachute harnesses was critical. Help was required if the jumper was injured or tangled as shown in this photograph. Weapons needed to be at hand to respond to enemy fire and to recover arms containers.

Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)

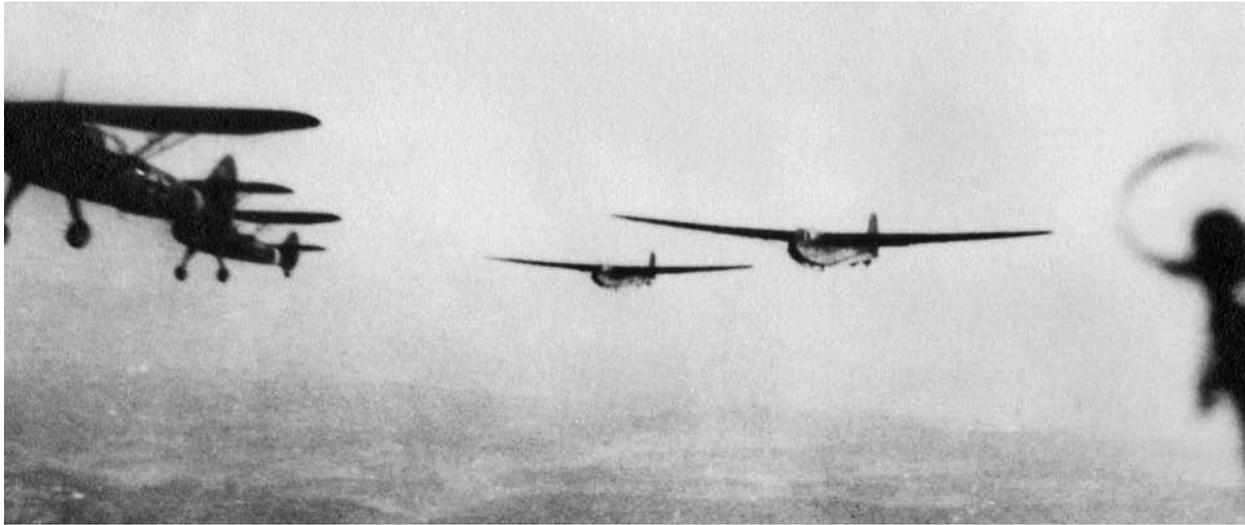




Vojni Istoriski Institut

Ca.314 bomber, Schwitzke wrote: “finally it was our turn as we were the last wave of dive bombers to fly right into this dense veil of smoke, which darkened the view from our window, and we threw our bombs into the narrow row of buildings along the street. Then we circled at the crest of the mountains, attacking the positions of the resistance fighters, who were stationed there.”⁵⁷ Also airborne, Henisch observed:

“Below us in a mountain cauldron, smoke rises from the rubble, the bandit nest that has already been visited by our fighter aircraft. There is not much recognizable from above and there is no time for that.”⁵⁸ According to SS reporter Adalbert Callewart, “Hell is broken loose over the small city. Between the detonation clouds of the resistance the *Stukas* and ground attack aircraft plunge, the armament rattles, the



P. H. Renold (National Capital Historical Sales)

Gliders followed the parachute troops with headquarters staff and Company 4. These were under tow from Ju 52s, Ju 87s, and here by Hs 126s. The glider streams had to form up and operate in conjunction with other transport aircraft.

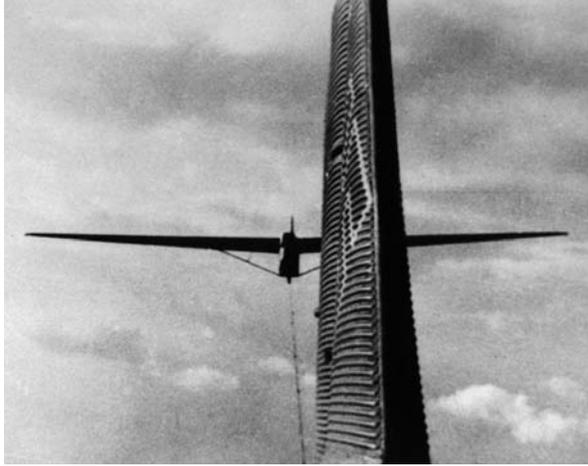
bombs dully rumble. The great moment arrived.”⁵⁹

0700—Airborne assault wave reaches the objective

At 0700, as the air attacks were completed, transports came out of the sunrise in their three- and five-aircraft flights strung in column. A 1,700-meter-tall mountain had to be crossed, followed by a descent to jump altitude, with engines throttled back for the drop over preselected drop zones. Transports slowed to 150 kilometers-per-hour at 120 to 150 meters above-ground-level over Drvar and delivered sticks of paratroopers and arms containers. Parachutists had to clear the aircraft, with barely seconds in the air, hit the ground and roll, get out of their harness, and orient themselves to find arms containers and identify squad and platoon rally points (at this stage in the war German paratroopers carried their small arms on

their person). Perhaps 15 minutes were taken up with this before proceeding with their first task which was to secure the drop zones and approaches outside of Drvar.

Transport aircraft, each with 12 jumpers and their arms containers, dropped troops into action at three separate drop zones: Group Green (95 men) seized the northeast of Drvar and Group Blue (100 men) seized the southeast, with both defending the eastern approaches to the objective. Group Red (85 men) seized the high ground southwest of Drvar and then linked up with Groups Blue and Green. Rybka and his command staff were with Group Red while the remainder of the headquarters arrived in the gliders. Small unit leader Peter H. Renold, attached to Group Red, recalled: “We jumped off without any problems . . . The landing speed was perfect so we knew the wind was in our favor. We landed on a road close to the town. . . . After we got rid of our harness and parachutes, we took our



P. H. Renold (National Capital Historical Sales)
A Ju 52 tows a DFS 230 glider to Drvar, 25 May 1944.

guns and went on our way.”⁶⁰

While the paratroopers were still securing drop zones, the glider force arrived overhead. Holding 10 men each, including a *Luftwaffe* pilot, gliders landed troops on designated objectives as complete units. These formed a total of six battle groups, along with the battalion’s heavy weapons teams. Team Panther (110 men) captured Objective Citadel, Tito’s command post at an inn-complex; Team Daredevil (70 men) seized Objective Western Cross, the western exits of the town, and the radio station located there; Team Stormer (50 men) grabbed Objective Moscow, the Russian mission; Team Attacker (40 men) took Objective London, the British mission, holding the high ground to the south; Team Biter (20 men) held Objective Warsaw, near London; and Team Breaker (50 men) captured Objective America, the United States mission.

Gliders were released over Drvar at about 915 meters above-ground-level and made their approach from the northwest. They descended in concentric spirals, circling twice before going into a steep dive over their designated landing zones. The drogue parachute was deployed to brake the descent at the last minute and allowed a shallow landing flare close to the ground. In one glider, *Luftwaffe* reporter Viktor Schuller observed:

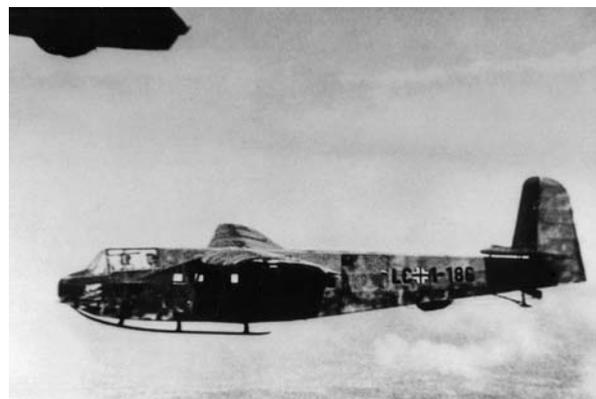
The tow cables are released. They flutter like paper streamers at the tail end of the departing airplane, as if wanting to wave goodbye. Good luck to us, now there is no going back! And the glider seems to be suspended in air, or so it would seem. Without making a sound, just as if someone were jumping head first from a great height into the unknown, menacing space. . . . But first one has the feeling of abandonment, as if one had been left alone in the air. Of course this is wrong, because to the right and left above and below sail the other quiet birds, with only the wind howling into the struts, themselves howling down into the bandit nest—below it is hell on this early morning. So—down we go!⁶¹

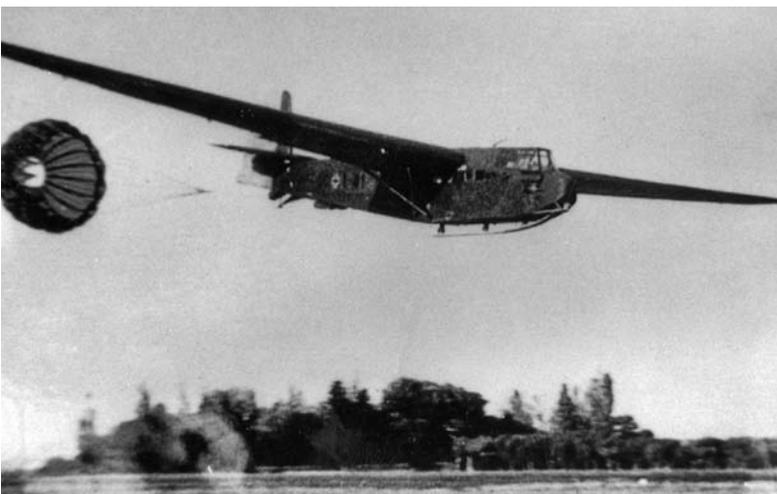
Flying a Team Panther glider, Sieg wrote:

I decided on a nose-dive with the brake parachute. With a barely perceptible jolt the dive parachute had unfolded at the tail of the

DFS 230 gliders brought in combat teams together as groups, while paratroopers landed dispersed. These combat groups attacked specified objectives important to the overall effort.

P. H. Renold (National Capital Historical Sales)





P. H. Renold (National Capital Historical Sales)

A drogue parachute deployed to brake DFS 230 descent at the last minute. This occurred just prior to landing and allowed a pinpoint, though rough, stop.

fuselage. The heavily loaded glider with its 10 occupants lost momentum and dived at a steep angle on the target obscured with smoke and mist. The altimeter dropped at a fast rate, 1,500 meters, 1,000 meters, 500 meters and the target, the wall of the Citadel of Drvar and the headquarters building began to take on shape. I recognized two anti-aircraft guns, saw the Partisans fleeing in panic and concentrated on landing. As the dive leveled out I attempted to come close to the ground and as near as possible to the wall. Just above the ground I ejected the brake parachute and, as if struck by a whip, my glider shot forward and slid to a halt a few meters in front of the Citadel wall . . . Fierce rifle and machine-gun fire rained down on us from the Citadel . . . The paratroopers stormed over the wall from all sides into Tito's headquarters.⁶²

Glider brought compact combat teams and battalion heavy weapons (mortars, recoilless antitank guns, heavy machine guns, and flame throwers), albeit with a greater risk during descent and landing from hostile fire or terrain. The initial challenge was to get clear of the aircraft and proceed to their task or to unload and emplace their crew-served weapons. Most immediately began shooting their way to assigned objectives.⁶³ Henisch recorded:

“Everyone out!” yells the squad leader. In the shortest time the glider is left behind. Luckily, we landed in a high wheat field which provides us with cover from all sides. From everywhere screaming, zipping, and zinging is going over our heads. The shots smack through the abandoned aircraft. The glider transports have

This Combat Team Panther glider landed on top of a Partisan anti-aircraft position at the edge of the walled cemetery known as Citadel. Just visible in the background is an Hs 126 liaison aircraft and the factory area.

Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)





Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)

Everybody out as a glider team clears its aircraft after landing! The two light MG 42 machine guns on the left and the assistants with spare ammunition identify them as rifle squad machine gun teams.

landed around the bandits nest. At the edges of the village the paratroopers are already fighting for every house.⁶⁴

A *Luftwaffe* pilot flying a Team Daredevil glider landed west of town at the crossroad known as the Western Cross. At 800 meters he prepared to dive, but:

My brake parachute refused to work. I pulled out of the dive, turned through 180 degrees and came in again. When we landed . . . the right-hand wing strut was snapped off by the force. Before the glider came to a proper standstill, the doors were

thrown open and the SS-paratroopers were out. While we were landing we came under heavy fire from the eastern mountain slope. No one was wounded and we crept in a flat gully towards the nearest house, where some members of the other glider crews had already taken shelter.⁶⁵

Their objective was a communications center which, along with Tito's headquarters, was considered a critical target of the raid. Others landed to take Objective Warsaw, despite missing one glider en route: "We landed approximately 5 kilometers away . . . At landing we already



Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)

As the assault proceeded, the landing and drop zones became crowded as the different waves men and material mixed together. Reorganization was a critical task to ensure the right men and materials are sent on to their objectives.

had to keep the initially gaping and the resisting Partisans from our throats with pistols and hand grenades. Those who did not fall surrendered, hence the high number of prisoners. This did not make the path to the actual target any easier.” The objective proved to be an American

Another view from the same location shows the exposure to fire can complicate efforts to retain control of the battle. For the parachute battalion, there is no going back at this point.

Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)



metrological station rather than the suspected command facility.⁶⁶ Team Attacker missed the British Mission, but captured the Allied journalists who were still there and roused out of a nearby slit trench with their Partisan escort. According to *Time* reporter Pribichevich at Objective London: “About 30 more large low-flying aircraft arrived and . . . sticks of brownish parachutes flapped open no more than 200 feet above us and gliders began to steer towards the ground 200 yards in front of us. We look at each other and knew there was no escape.” As one German recalled, “We took the Yugoslavs completely by surprise.”⁶⁷

By 0745, reorganization and assaults proceeded supported by attack aircraft. The OKW war diary reported the first wave went in according to plan “with high casualties.”⁶⁸ Paratroopers were killed in their parachute harnesses; others were injured on landing, and from supporting aircraft “friendly fire.” More losses occurred with the glider force as at least three DFS 230s crashed on landing,



Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)

The built-up area of Drvar including the rail yard and factory area seen from the air during the attack was the focus for initial efforts of the assault. The destroyed facilities made it difficult to clear and later proved too large to defend.

due to injured pilots, missed approaches, or perhaps the high altitude. Others were hit by fire in the air, while some were released early—including one glider that grounded 10 kilometers away. Another landed by chance at the base of the cliff in front of Tito's location, nosing over and killing its occupants.⁶⁹

Rybka's headquarters at Objective Citadel consisted of a command staff, including an assistant adjutant, a number of messengers, and radio communicators. Present was an engineer assault force established from spare personnel that were the commander's reserve with demolition charges, flamethrowers, and antitank weapons. Battalion adjutant SS-Lieutenant Otto Mertely established the main battalion command post on high ground southwest of Drvar, that included clerks, communicators,

a graphic artist, and liaison teams from the *Luftwaffe* and Army. Constant and frequent reporting to higher commands was stressed. Direct radio communications was both to Commanders, XVth Corps and German *Luftwaffe* Croatia. Fieseler Fi 156 *Storch* (Stork) and Henschel Hs 126 liaison aircraft were used for air observation. Air panels or swastika flags, flares, and smoke were used for recognition to communicate with supporting aircraft by prearranged signals. Doctors Hermann and Helmersen, with their medical orderlies manned the battalion aid station. With each company were stretcher parties, and every platoon had a first-aid medic and supplies. Medical evacuation for serious cases was available using Fi 156s. Food and ammunition consisted of what was carried, with no immediate resupply expected except by air.

Paratroopers had to use fire and movement techniques to seize, occupy, and defend the built-up areas and isolated farmsteads. The resistance was immediate and from surprising directions, including by women and children.

Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)





Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)

Pistols, rifles, submachine guns, and light machine guns are shown in use as well as the variety of airborne equipment and clothing. On the far left is a combat cameraman, one of several sent in to document the attack.

The battalion was on its own, to carry on “until relieved.”

The initial attack was toward the center of town, supported by mortars, heavy machine guns, and dive bombers guided by signal flares. The Germans advanced on the town in skirmish lines, bounding from cover to cover, using their superior firepower. Once in the town, fighting was house-to-house with positions changing hands several times. The Partisans fought back immediately but were disorganized and lightly armed. Resistance was by headquarters personnel, delegates from the youth congress, and civilians—including women and children according to German accounts.⁷⁰ Reports were of captured Italian light tanks being used, but these “quickly cleared off and we never saw them again.”⁷¹ A participant commented in a later

interview: “One of the things we had not been taught was house-to-house fighting, that is fighting in urban areas. Although Drvar was not a large place it did have houses and streets—which sheltered the bandits—and therefore qualifies for the term ‘urban.’ The enemy fire was random and uncoordinated. It was really the worst sort of luck to be hit by such undirected fire.”⁷² In the town center in a building housing the District Committee of the Communist Youth League of Yugoslavia, Partisans fought until killed, throwing back German grenades and refusing appeals to surrender. Notable resistance was at the radio station, distinguished by its telephone lines and antenna array.⁷³ Though bombed, it was still violently defended, in part by the young men and women who ran the communications facility. It was finally

Arms containers became wheeled carts on the ground and carried ammunition and explosives needed in the close combat encountered. These paratroopers are carrying machine gun ammunition for the battalion heavy machine guns.

Adolf Kunzmann (SS-PK)





Wilhelm Baitz (OKW-PK)

Urban combat demanded close combat skill in the use of hand weapons and aggressiveness, all hallmarks of paratroopers. Grenades, pistols, and bayonets had to be used with effect.

reduced by explosives and the survivors were summarily shot despite orders to preserve them and their material for intelligence exploitation.⁷⁴ “After a short while,” wrote Henisch, “all the groups had landed and concentrated their attacks on the village. Out of cellars, church towers, and windows the enemy pulls back. Our MG

42 rattles across the street and cleans up without mercy. After a brief time the village is in our hands. Prisoners are brought in from all sides.”⁷⁵ The Germans broke the resistance in the town center by 0845 but had not found the expected Partisan senior leadership.

A variety of impressions were made on the victors. In the interest of security, German agents in place had not been warned ahead of time and suffered the same fate as their intended victims observed Helmuth Kleper, who found the bodies of two Yugoslav women “who we had trained as spies and sent in [to Tito’s] camp with Morse radio transmitters. We had been in constant communications with these girls who had done valuable work for us. They made the whole attack possible.”⁷⁶ To Lieutenant Schuller on the ground it seemed,

after brief house-to-house fighting, with the usual shots coming from cellars, roofs and church tower windows, the first part of the orders had been carried out. The village, the hidden hiding place of Tito, is occupied. Everyone who is still alive, and did not run into the nearby woods when the first bombs fell, is herded together, after coming out of the most unusual hiding places. Strange forms emerge. Only a few still try to escape. Especially the women—they act totally unreasonably. One of them runs like mad through the vegetable garden. She screams, whilst swinging an Italian gun and her bright-red dressing gown flutters behind her like a flag. No “Halt” or “Stoi” can stop her. She is in a rage, she

jumps and one expects her to be riding through the air on her gun— then she falls on her face.⁷⁷

From Lieutenant Schwitzke flying overhead:

Of course the whole operation was not yet finished. But already the assault troops are approaching from all sides and are freeing the soldiers who are cut off. But even from the height of the dive bombers' view, one can see that in the town the men on the ground have accomplished their aim already. After a short time, on departing, we can see the same group, which previously had been seen jumping from house to house, securing their positions, walking upright along a path between the fields. Soon they will meet up with comrades, who were sent to them.

The inn-complex believed by the Germans to hold the Partisan high command. Only after hard fighting and a search was it found to be used by Central Committee of the Communist Youth League. The attached intelligence specialists were used to continue the hunt.

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Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)

Captured Partisans were hustled to collection points for interrogation. Once disarmed, any resistance could result in immediate execution, but live prisoners were needed for answers. Language experts and Croat irregulars were used to ask "Where is Tito?"

And they will hear their stories. Because a few secrets of the guerilla town, taken by surprise in the morning slumber, had undoubtedly come to light.⁷⁸

0930—Drvar occupied, main attempt to capture Tito

By 0930, the battalion held the town and had captured some 400 Yugoslavs of all description. "In all corners of the village it crackles, crashes, and bangs. Black smoke hangs above the valley," wrote Schuller. "One ammunition store after another goes up in flames, the flames consume the enormous clothes and food stores. Everything, apart from things which can be carried away, have to be destroyed. How many nights and how many supply flights did it take to bring all this stuff to the place by air?"⁷⁹

"Hands up, get out!" echoed through the streets as prisoners were collected and gathered in the rear of the two-story administrative building, the largest in town, while others were locked up in the now empty gliders. Prisoners were screened by the Brandenburg specialists and segregated



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Prisoners included a mixed bag of men, women, and children with the resulting concerns of sorting out “who was who.” Guerrillas without uniforms, insignia, or identification made this a problem for conventional German forces.

as guerrillas, civilians, Croat and Italian deserters, and special cases like the Allied newsman and a medical doctor of French-Russian extraction. Also found were a captured Chetnik district commander and youth organizer.⁸⁰ Seized from the Partisans, according to Callewart, were “weapons of all kinds, mass quantities of munitions, supply arsenals, secret orders, documents, radios, [and] many captives . . . The wasps’ nest has burnt out.”⁸¹ Henisch concluded, “Surely the majority of the bandit-staff fled for shelter, but they could not prevent the capture of irreplaceable and important material.”⁸² In front of Schuller,

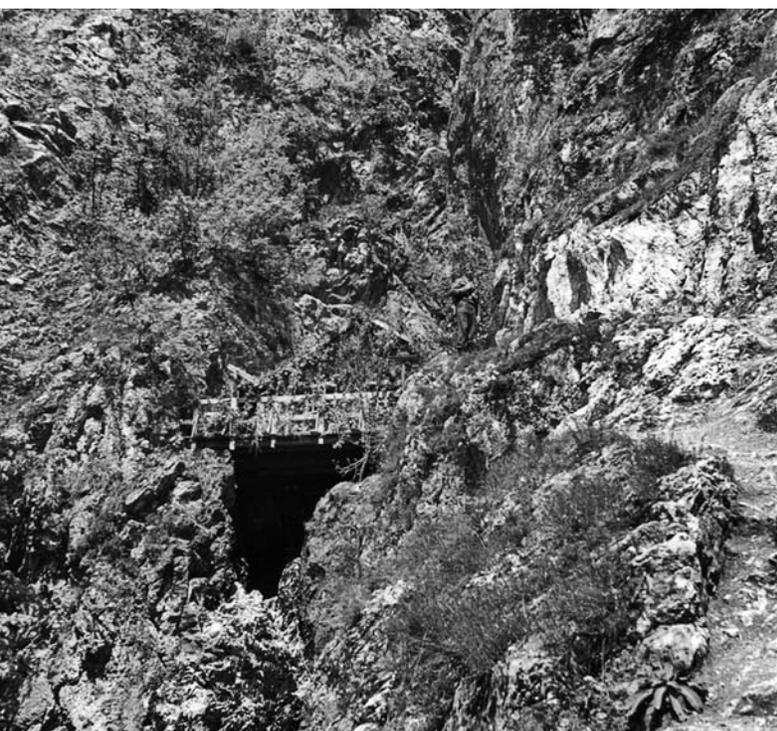
SS-men carry thick paper bundles and folders, which are collected carefully. It is interesting to study Tito’s original papers. One could say a lot about it all. Unbelievable and astonishing are

the things which are coming to light. . . . So that is what the headquarters of a bolshevist bandit leader looks like. Here were hatched all the underhand attacks and numerous pillaging attacks and murders, which brought fear into the whole country, and from here, via the other side of the Adriatic Sea, spans the network of allies, friends, patrons, and supporters. From here secret paths lead to the vast, inscrutable forests and mountains of the western Balkan regions.”⁸³

Two of the allied journalists captured and held by the Germans at Drvar. This is U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer Gene Fowler from the Office of Strategic Services in Cairo. Behind is Sergeant Slade whose photographs of the Partisans are in this book.

Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)





M. J. Slade (Imperial War Museum)

This photograph by Slade indicates some of the physical difficulties faced in trying to take Tito's position. In place is the camouflaged hut and to the right is the narrow path that was its only approach. Tito and his staff escaped through the gully seen below the hut.

half-way over the wall and emptied his cartridge clip into the boy's body." It seemed from the shouting match that took place between an officer and the reporter that the Germans did not need any more bad press.⁸⁷ Later when German dead and wounded were found tortured and mutilated, even the pretense of propriety was removed. Henisch wrote: "we found several bodies of paratroopers that were captured while still alive. They were branded with a glowing hot iron . . . A corporal had his arms blown off. We knew what would happen to us if we fell into the hands of the animals alive."⁸⁸

Captives were forced to move German

wounded to the cemetery half a kilometer away from the center of town where the battalion aid station and prisoner holding area were established on dominating terrain. Other working parties carried ammunition, water, and the dead despite continued fighting.⁸⁹ "On the highest hill of the valley a cemetery is situated," wrote Schuller. "It is surrounded by a kind of fortification ditch. From here one can see the whole battleground. The village, the meadows and the valley, looks more like a basin, as it is surrounded by thickly wooded forest slopes. One would like to know how many thousand pairs of eyes, how many guns, ready to shoot at any moment, there are under trees and bushes—occasionally one can see figures on the deforested mountain ranges."⁹⁰

While the town was being mopped-up

The hunt for Tito was opposed throughout the day, picking up in strength during the mid- and late-day. Defensive efforts took on more importance to the parachute battalion and these Germans provided close-in security at the battalion command post at the cemetery overlooking Drvar and the factory complex.

Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)





Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)

The command post included the main radios used to contact higher headquarters and supporting aircraft. The Luftwaffe radio station and operators are in the foreground coordinating needed air support. In the background are other battalion staff members, including the adjutant in discussion about ongoing efforts.

and defenses organized, Rybka and his unit leaders had to determine from incoming reports whether Tito was among the dead or captured and decide what to do next. Firing was picking up at the foot of the hills beyond the town, particularly from Partisans on the north side of the Unac and from the officer's school to the east, who instead of withdrawing as expected, were fighting desperately to hold their positions. This prevented the Germans from crossing the river and led Rybka to feel they were defending something important, possibly Tito himself.⁹¹

With this he pulled in the groups allocated to capture the Allied missions to reinforce the group assigned to capture the Citadel. On order, Groups Red, Green, and Team Stormer were to abandon their initial

assignment to assist Team Panther in the effort to kill or capture Tito and his high command. But this was in a different location than had been briefed. According to Renold, after leaving the Partisan communications center he and his men “went back and reported to Captain Rybka on our return. We were assigned to Team Stormer for the assault of the Citadel, the so-called Partisan headquarters.”⁹² The Germans set up heavy machine guns south of the river and poured fire directly into the mouth of Tito’s “hole” or “cave” and its approaches, effectively sealing it off. With this covering fire, two squads of paratroopers crossed the river and moved up the narrow trail to the cave entrance. Heavy resistance came from Tito’s personal staff and escort battalion. “The fighting was hard, wounded were left and their weapons were taken,” wrote a squad member.⁹³

Battalion radios and operators provided contact with higher commands and advancing ground force motorized columns. By midday the concern was about the scheduled arrival of reinforcements and supplies.

Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)





Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)

The midday reinforcement took place in clear areas adjacent to the battalion headquarters position. The Field Replacement Company arrived by parachute from Ju 52s, with arms containers, while supplies came in by DFS 230 gliders. Note the various recovered containers.

Failing to make headway, the Germans pulled back and again hit the position with machine gun and mortar fire. If they could not advance, then the Partisans would not be allowed to withdraw.⁹⁴

By late morning, the situation was tense with the Germans holding Drvar and the Western Cross area. As early as 1000, Partisan counterattacks began from outlying units. To avoid German air attacks these quickly moved close on the run, charging with hand grenades trying to find exposed German flanks by moving across open ground. To meet them, Rybka had to redeploy a battle group to secure the area for the arrival of his second wave of jumpers. His goal was to “nail down the enemy where he was,” and to continue the attack on Tito’s suspected location. Fighter and bomber aircraft provided support throughout the day which had to be halted whenever forces became intermingled.⁹⁵

1000—Battle group moves to the southwest

After 1000, small German units moved out of the town through the fields toward the ridges to the southwest, getting as far as the base of the hills. There the approaches were held by machine-gun teams backed by mortar and recoilless antitank fire (the LG 40 produced a notable back-blast and had to move after firing). One weapons company machine-gun section took an Allied newsman with them and he wrote later:

Fifteen parachutists started out with two heavy machine guns across the young wheat fields towards the Partisan-held wooded ridge a mile off to the west. To the right and to the left of me similar small groups were advancing in the same direction. . . . After a few hundred meters we began to duck under invisible Partisan

A paratrooper lands outside the cemetery position next to a radio mast. Others were not so lucky and subject to Partisan small arms fire while in the air and before they could clear their parachute harnesses.

Adolf Kunzmann (SS-PK)





Adolf Kunzmann (SS-PK)

Reinforcements and supplies were welcome and came at the turning point of the fighting by the parachute battalion. Numbers of wounded and prisoners had already congregated at the battalion command post. These paratroops exhibit a mix of Waffen-SS and Luftwaffe weapons and field equipment.

sharpshooting; the hail of bullets gradually grew thicker and we ran across the clear spaces, taking cover from bush to bush, from ditch to ditch, from fence to fence, all of the time.⁹⁶

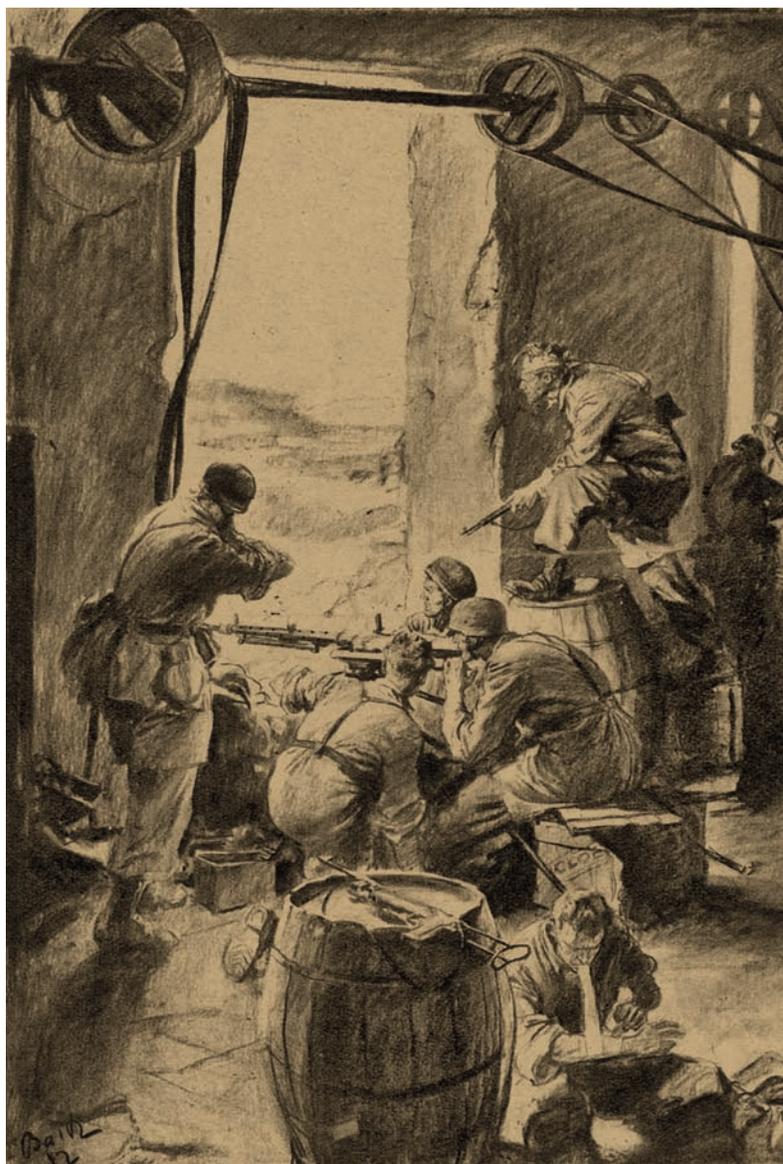
This came about because battalion adjutant SS-Lieutenant Mertely, “a man with a face like a death mask and a black patch over his right eye,” felt *Time* reporter Pribichevich “might like to see the war from our firing line.”

At 1150, a second wave of aircraft arrived consisting of some 20 transports and a couple of gliders carrying 220 men and two tons supplies dropped south and west of Drvar and the battalion command post. These met heavier fire than the first wave and suffered both in the air and on the ground. Prisoners were used by the paratroopers to clear the landing zone. As Henisch described it:

Dead Bolsheviks were laying everywhere. In the cemetery we dug in and called for fighter aircraft support. Since the landing four hours have past. The hard combat shows itself in all the faces. . . . Around noon, additional fighter aircraft charge the mountain tops. From the planes, the paratroopers release to allow the delivery of supplies and material. While the Bolsheviks are pinned to the ground by our fighter aircraft, new

Defending the industrial area was attempted in the face of Partisan counterattacks. But the extended complex proved too large for the parachute battalion to hold despite the desperation of its situation. Heavy machine guns, shown here, were needed for this, but only limited numbers were in hand.

Wilhelm Baitz (OKW-PK)





U.S. Army (National Archives and Records Administration)
Aside from fighter or bomber support, the heaviest weapon the paratroopers used were mortars, like the one being prepared for firing in this picture. This 81mm medium mortar had a range out to 1,900 meters but supplies of ammunition were limited to what could be carried by hand and arms containers. It was a 4th Company weapon along with heavy machine guns and recoilless artillery.

waves of paratroopers jump from lower altitudes, while their hard pressed comrades celebrate.”⁹⁷

These reinforcements consisted of the Field Replacement Company under the battalion deputy, SS-Captain Josef Obermaier, and were committed against the southwest ridge, advancing halfway up the slope before being stopped by defending Partisan forces.⁹⁸

1200—The second wave arrives

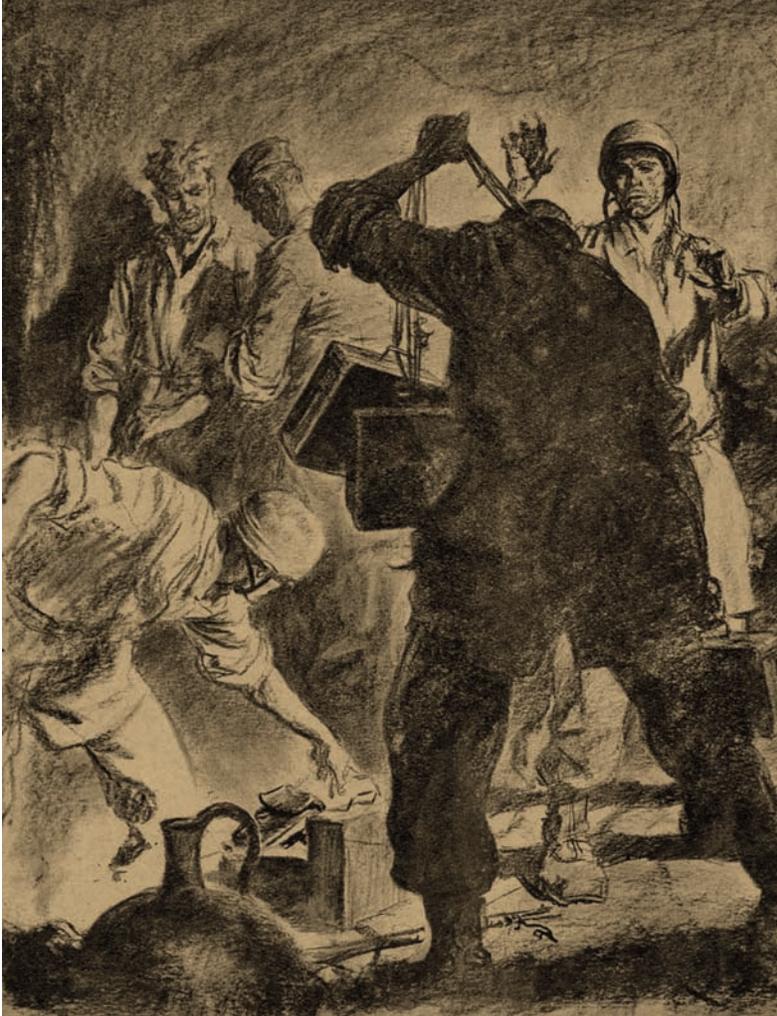
As the battle group reached the base of hills to the southwest, the second airborne wave arrived, and moved to reinforce them and up into the high ground. Later it was pulled back to protect exposed flanks, while the main body of the battalion held Drvar and industrial area to the northeast.

“With re-enforced strength we comb the woods,” writes Schuller. “These forests are indescribable.”⁹⁹ Henisch felt: “We are able to push the enemy back considerably in order to get a little breathing room for ourselves. We all know this is just a short break to catch our breath for the main attack that is coming soon. We are surrounded with no communications to the rear. We also know that replacement units are on their way from all sides, so that the surrounding bandits are surrounded just the same.”¹⁰⁰ At mid-day, the situation was dangerous with the appearance of more fighters from the 1st, 3d, and 6th *Lika* and *Proletarian* Divisions, which moved to surround the parachutist’s positions in the industrial section of town, the northeast,

As fighting peaked in outlying areas to the northeast and southwest, defensive concerns caused a withdrawal to the central cemetery position before nightfall. The concentration of men and material resulted in a crowded but effective defense that the Partisans could not break. The most dangerous period was at night when air support became impractical and communication was lost.

National Capital Historical Sales





Wilhelm Baitz (OKW-PK)

By the dawn next day the Germans were low on ammunition and not in communications with the relief forces. Additional supplies were secured from gliders and arms containers that were nearby.

and the southwest. Firing picked up around 1400, inflicting heavy losses on both sides as key positions changed hands several times. Close combat continued into the afternoon and the town was in flames with heavy losses among the civilians. Rybka kept up his effort on Tito's position until he was seriously wounded by a grenade in the process. Those from this failed attempt felt the position could have been taken with more strength, even though the battle groups engaged numbered almost a third of the assault force. The battalion had not seized Tito, his staff, or the Allied missions and was losing control of the objective area.

Small arms, grenades, and mortars caused the fight to peak again at 1600. The battalion signaled it was "completely open to enemy view. Injured cannot be cared for. Enemy is amassing strong forces."¹⁰¹

To the southwest, Allied reporter Pribichevich, with a machine gun section in a peasant house on a tree-covered elevation at the foot of the mountains, wrote: "Now all the Germans, except the machine-gun crew, took cover in the plum orchard behind the house and I followed them. The two German machine guns were where nothing could be seen but the quick movement of a bush twig. Here and there from the mysterious slope short bursts answered each long German burst and the Partisan's precision fire seemed coming closer and closer." Once the Partisan's got the range, they began to pick the Germans off. In two hours, one was killed, one mortally wounded, and four wounded slightly. The captive reporter, a Yugoslav father, and child were used to carry ammunition to the exposed machine guns. First the man, then the son, were struck down in the cross fire, but "that beautiful day the birds continued to sing in the tree-tops above the machine-gun fire, the Germans, and the wounded father and mutilated boy."¹⁰²

1800—Battalion withdraws to cemetery

By 1800, the Partisans moved to encircle the Germans and drove them from the foothills back to Drvar and the industrial area. A pessimistic journalist reported, "It is clear to us that the enemy would not leave us alone. What we were expecting to happen happened sooner than later. A thousand eyes watched us from the mountains. From three sides the enemy



Wilhelm Baitz (OKW-PK)

Air resupply is critical for dispersed airborne operations. With the limited amount of weapons and ammunition carried into action only quick delivery could ensure survival.

launched his counterattacks. The battalion withdrew to the cemetery that commands the high ground.”¹⁰³ Recalled Renold, “My group and I got through to the graveyard, where our friends were fighting real close to the enemy. From crashed transport gliders men tried to find weapons and food.”¹⁰⁴ One of the glider pilots wrote he “was able to reach the flat trench dug along the northwestern edge of the cemetery uninjured, where men were already sheltering shoulder to shoulder.” He remembered, “A few meters behind me a radio post had been set up and on the southwestern end of the Citadel there was a collecting point for the wounded . . . At times the fire simply hailed down on us.”¹⁰⁵

By now the parachute battalion had suffered heavy losses, including Rybka who was evacuated by air ambulance late in the day with other seriously wounded. The battalion adjutant was injured and the second-in-command was dead. Captain Bentrup, the attached *Luftwaffe* paratrooper, took charge and ordered a perimeter defense on the high ground around the town cemetery, dug in behind an existing five-foot concrete wall and ditch, in an area of about 150 feet by 250 feet.

“A serious short meeting took place

between the group leaders that left no questions about the situation,” wrote Henisch, “surrounded, without communications to the rear, with many wounded in a situation that was more than serious. . . . We removed the wounded in case of an emergency defense and everyone would take their spot where they are placed. It won’t be easy for the bolsheviks to ‘cash us in’ during the night.”

Outlying units were ordered back with the use of signal flares. Cut off a kilometer to the southwest was one section of paratroopers defending a farmhouse that does not survive the night. The ever-present reporter continued:

No communications have been established with the rolling motorized units. We have to hold out, as long as possible. Not a single round of ammunition can be wasted “on air”. . . . the situation becomes more and more critical. The over-strengthened enemy, situated in the mountains around us, fires on us with heavy weapons. In one corner of the cemetery, the doctors have set up their aid station. More and more fallen ranks add to the dead and wounded. . . . A mortar bulls-eye

knocks the radio out of service and cuts us off completely to the rear. Once and a while our fighters and aerial observers can be seen circling above, and they attack immediately to give us some respite. A dropped message tells us that our own motorized units are unable to get to us because the snake-winding road was blown up in the mountain, and those units are engaged in heavy fighting with the bandits as well. "Hold out as long as possible," that is what the saying is.¹⁰⁶

During the twilight hours there was complete quiet and stillness. Here and there a shot slapped across the cemetery wall. Dusk arrived as tracers criss-crossed the valley. With night, German air support was hampered and the Partisans advanced from the surrounding heights for the kill. In the dark they pursued the Germans from Drvar, isolating them on the cemetery slopes. "The main body of the battalion occupied new positions around the cemetery and established security on all four sides," recorded the 7th SS-Mountain Division.¹⁰⁷ Callewart wrote:

At the onset of dusk the bandits advance again. They approach from all sides. But the *SS-Fallschirmjager* have prepared for defense for the night. The bullets whistle from every direction . . . The attack is retaliated in fierce fighting. It is night, dark night. Nothing can be seen of the desolate mountain ridges that surround the valleys any longer. Sometimes everything is calm and no shots interrupt the silence. Suddenly the machine guns rattle from

all sides and from every corner, and the impact of [mortars] stir up the defender's position. Reports go from man to man!¹⁰⁸

By 2030, the Germans had consolidated, with some confusion, to this high ground into a "hedgehog position."¹⁰⁹ Captain Bentrup's concerns were for the battalion's survival and Allied air attacks.

2130—Cemetery position occupied

At 2100, Schuller stated: "Soon they will come. And they do. Full of rage and desperation, because they are not going to be driven from their cozy hideouts without a fight. The booty, which is now in our hands, it too valuable to be given up easily. Everyone had dug himself into a hole, as deeply as possible. The earth feels warm and soft and our only comforts are our arms and our ammunition. The mortars are damned annoying."¹¹⁰ Henisch wrote: "Around 2200 the song and dance starts again. The bolsheviks shoot at the cemetery with phosphorous rounds. Mortars take over and place the cemetery under fire, putting us into one situation after another. Holding on to tombstones, behind the wall, and behind graves, the men press themselves behind these for dear life. Despite the seemingly hopeless situation, there is lots of fire discipline. The squad leaders hand out by whispering their orders."¹¹¹

Partisan mortar fire was particularly devastating, killing 15 to 20 that night, damaging battalion radios, and hitting the first aid post. Dead, wounded, and prisoners lay among the graves and monuments. Food was limited to "iron" rations and what had been looted that day, with a single stand-pipe for water. The Partisans used the cover

of darkness to get close on all four sides of the position as ammunition ran low. Axis night fighters and dive bombers were on station, but with little measurable effect. One veteran recalled: “We had an outer perimeter of positions and a small inner perimeter. After every one of the bandit attacks was driven off, those in the outer perimeter were relieved by a man from the inner line. . . . That way the burden was not too hard to carry.”¹¹² “Then the men swear: ‘Now harder than ever!’” recorded Callewart. “However hopeless the situation may seem, and what it will cost, they maintain their position. Between the fighting comrades lie the slightly wounded, who fill the magazines for the submachine guns and prepare the munitions belt for the machine guns.”¹¹³

Execution, X-Day plus 1

Fighting increased in intensity through the night until dawn as the Partisans tried to overrun the cemetery in a “glowing red fog of battle” and frequent illumination flares. A survivor wrote later, “During my whole life I never knew such a short night.”¹¹⁴ At the crisis, guerrillas entered the perimeter:

Suddenly, without warning, the Reds were climbing over the wall . . . A whole mass of our flares burst—all of them white—and in the glare the bandits were silhouetted. We shot them down, but they seemed immune to rifle fire and kept coming. Then some of them from behind cover of the wall threw hand grenades and got some light mortars in action. . . . In that particular attack, the Reds



Adolf Kunzmann (SS-PK)

Daybreak brought relief and air support after remaining in place over night. Communication was restored with relieving motorized forces but actions were limited to reorganization and waiting for help. This allowed the surrounding Partisans to withdraw unhindered except from air attack and began a wider pursuit for the elusive Tito, his staff, and Allied missions.

actually got inside the cemetery and held a small bridgehead.

As Partisans came in through this breach, the paratroops counterattacked and killed those inside the cemetery.¹¹⁵ Participant Hensch recounts:

the enemy pushes into the cemetery at hand grenade throwing distance. In the meantime, white columns of flares rise up, with burning eyes the riflemen stare over the wall and fling rows of machine-gun and sub-machine-gun fire into the rows of crawling enemy. The firing does not take a second, but it has its effect. A quiet moment, then the enemy lays another hail of fire onto our small area costing us more casualties. Again he tries to get to the cemetery wall, but once again he is beaten off. There is not thought involved, only the will

to survive and to revenge our bleeding comrades.

Added another, “The bandits attack 20 times, and 20 times they are fought off.” Calls to surrender are answered with weapons fire and grenades.¹¹⁶

0330—Enemy attacks repulsed

During all of this, the belief that Tito was among the enemy dead in the town or at the “cave” on its outskirts could not be cleared up. The intelligence specialists spent the night near the radio reviewing documents and questioning prisoners to solve this mystery and began a claim there had been a Croat betrayal about the attack rather than a German failure to accurately locate Tito. By 0330, it was admitted that Tito had escaped, having left his cave-quarters around noon and moving to the plateau overlooking the valley.¹¹⁷ The Partisan attacks

The SS-Parachute Battalion had a hollow victory that lost even its public relations value in the face of the reality of Allied advances from the East and West that began in June 1944. Battalion Doctors Hermann and von Helmersen, along with their medics, were kept busy saving survivors. Here battalion wounded and dead are collected at the first aid station for disposition.

Adolf Kunzmann (SS-PK)



were finished by 0430 and they pulled out before sunrise, as the ground offered them no cover from renewed air attack. At this point, a group of pistol-packing parachutists used prisoners to recover needed ammunition from nearby gliders. These crawled from a corner of the graveyard covered by a machine gun. Finding nothing but dead, they returned in 10 minutes with ammunition cases in the unusual quiet.

0600—Direct air support resumes

“Over the pointed tips of the mountains, the first glimpse of morning shines,” wrote Henisch.

All our hope lies in the light that the waking new day brings. . . . With first light, suddenly there is quiet. . . . The new day must bring a final decision, and it does. Just as the light had gotten a little stronger, the sound of fighter aircraft is heard and breaks the battle stillness. The fact that our radio went down, and the efforts of aerial observers, obviously made our situation critically clear. A light goes over the dusty and tired faces of the warriors; an everyone watches a German reconnaissance plane whiz over our cemetery position. Green flares show the fighter aircraft in which direction the enemy is coming from. Then the Air Force drops bombs all around us and into the attack positions of the enemy and causes him heavy losses.¹¹⁸

At 0600, a half-dozen Axis fighter-bombers arrived overhead and attacked withdrawing Partisans, some reported wearing captured camouflage jump smocks. “In the east the day dawns. With the first

rays of sun the *Stukas* and attack aircraft arrive again. A deafening drone hangs over the valley and echoes a thousand times from all mountain ridges,” observes a reporter. One participant recalled “with the daylight came the first German reconnaissance aircraft; we wanted to wave and call out, to shake off the nightmare of the night.”¹¹⁹ At 0700, a flight of 12 Ju 52s dropped urgently needed supplies.¹²⁰ More *Stukas* bombed and machine gunned the valley area that morning. The relieving ground forces were stalled by Partisan defensive efforts and in some case counterattacks. Demolished bridges had to be spanned before the planned link-up could take place.¹²¹ The SS-parachute battalion survived the night and was told to count their losses and be prepared to be relieved by ground forces—sooner or later. The battalion had only 250 effective troops and numerous dead and wounded of the 874 men that entered the valley the day before.¹²²

0700 to 1000—Link-up with ground forces

“Early in the morning numerous dead Partisans were laying around, whose corpses reeked terribly days later because we did not immediately find them,” remembered one paratrooper. Radio contact with relieving forces was established by 0700 and from the cemetery squads were sent out to recover lost ground, ammunition, food, and water. Supplies were brought in as the fight continued, while more prisoners and booty were secured, and the battalion expanded its strong point.¹²³ Outside help arrived around 1000 in the form of reconnaissance elements of the 7th SS-Mountain Division, heralded by the distinctive sound of MG 42

machine-gun fire. “We are from ‘Prinz Eugen.’ We will get you out,” they declared.¹²⁴

Between 1245 and 1600, elements of the 92d Motorized Regiment, Battle Group Willam, and the 373d Infantry Division arrived as well. With the advent of more ground forces, the area around Drvar was combed, but little remained except dead Partisans, propaganda material, and military supplies including Tito’s American jeep and dress uniform.

German newspapers later reported: “Deep cliff gorges that provided for roomy caves sheltered the ringleaders of the Moscow official Josip Broz, alias Tito. Paratroopers of the Armed-SS and motorized Army units dug the buried ‘headquarters’ up.” They then proceeded to systematically burn houses and to destroy anything that could not be removed.¹²⁵

Captain Bentrup reorganized the battalion and moved back into Drvar, taking possession of the administration building for the wounded. Prisoners were again used to move the injured, bury the dead, carry supplies, and to fetch water. Other tasks included salvaging parachutes, arms containers, weapons, ammunition, and destroying gliders that were beyond recovery. Allied Supermarine Spitfire fighters made an appearance for the first time on the afternoon of the 26th, catching the German columns on the road. On the same day, the *Royal Air Force Mediterranean Review* reported that Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses and Lockheed P-38 Lightnings struck the Bihac rail yard and airfield, followed by attacks at Rajanak, Kutlovec, Bosanski, and Livno (more than 1,000 Allied air sorties were flown the last week in May to counter the Axis



Hier saß Josip Broz Häuser einer kleinen Stadt in den bosnischen Bergen, von der aus der Räuberhauptmann „Tito“ (mit wahren Namen Josip Broz) seine Banditen hehrte. Die Aufnahme wurde von einem amerikanischen Kriegsberichtler hergestellt.

DIE „RESIDENZ“ DES ZUCHTHÄUSLERS

W-FALLSCHIRMJÄGER SPRINGEN INS ZENTRUM DER BANDENGRUPPEN DES JOSIP BROZ

Vor kurzem meldete der Wehrmachtbericht die Zerschlagung des Zentrums der Bandengruppen des Zuchthäuslers Josip Broz. In schweren Kämpfen, bei denen sich die 7. W-Gebirgsdivision „Prinz Eugen“ und das



Eine Aktion deutscher W-Fallschirmjäger beginnt.
Die dritte und vierte Kette springt, während die schon gelandeten W-Fallschirmjäger sich zum Angriff sammeln.

Rechts: Wieder sind einige Häuser von Banditen gesäubert.



Am zweiten Tag: Das Unternehmen wird durchgeführt.
Weiße Leuchtkugeln zeigen den W-Fallschirmjägern die neue Angriffsrichtung.



Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)

This was the image of victory that was publicized. Captured trophies included flags of the Allied Mission displayed by these paratroopers. The rifle of the man in the middle has a grenade launcher on its muzzle.

offensive).¹²⁶ “All movement had to be carried out at night in this region because during the day when we were marching, the *Jabos* [Allied fighter-bombers] were already there,” recalled one parachute battalion member, “I assume the Americans were informed of our movement from the Partisans via radio.” Despite this, the battalion rear party arrived with the baggage train allowing the survivors to depart for Petrovac on 29 May. From Petrovac, casualties were sent to base hospitals while the remainder of the battalion regrouped at Laibach: “During the transfer from Petrovac to Bihac all companies were on high alert because until we arrived we were in Partisan territory. . . . Except for a few slightly wounded we had no casualties. The motorized march continued and around mid-June we arrived in Laibach.” At the end of June 1944, the parachute battalion had a total of 292 men

fit for duty (15 officers, 81 noncommissioned officers, and 196 men).¹²⁷

Analysis

On 3 June, with much secrecy the Allies moved Tito, first to Bari in Italy, then to the more defensible island of Vis in the Adriatic where the struggle for Yugoslav liberation continued under the communists until final victory. On 6 June, the German high command announced the completion of Operation Knight’s Move without comment about Tito’s escape. The Allied invasion of Western Europe was under way and news from the Balkans was for the moment of less than front-page interest.

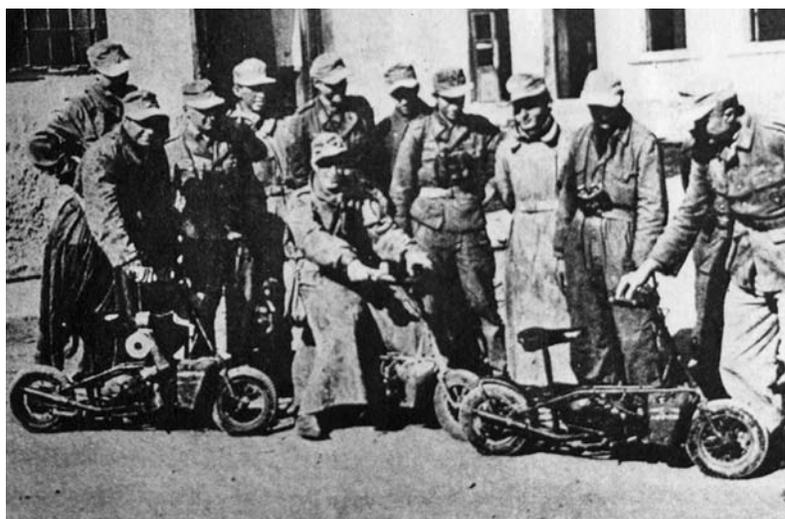
The German Armed Forces High Command summary of Operation Knight’s Move stated: “According to preliminary reports, the enemy lost 6,240 men. In

addition, numerous weapons of all kinds and many supply installations were captured.”¹²⁸

General Rendulic’s 2d *Panzer* Army felt: “The operation against the Partisans in Croatia enjoyed considerable success” by 1) destroying their sanctuary area, command and control, and supply centers; 2) capturing Allied missions and airfields; 3) obtaining critical documents and signals equipment; 4) “severely battering” some five “elite communist” formations into avoiding further combat; and, 5) providing the Allies a real picture of Partisan combat capabilities.

Other prizes included this uniform of Tito’s left with a village tailor. It is examined by paratroopers and soldiers from the relief force.

Lkz19 (Bundesarchiv)



National Capital Historical Sales

German troops display air-delivered “Wellbikes” from the British Mission used for liaison and messengers. They were airborne issue provided by supply drops to the Partisans.

General von Leyser, the corps commander for Knight’s Move, believed that the operation was important for the entire conduct of combat in the interior and along the Balkan coast. All this was achieved under difficult conditions including Allied air attacks. The Partisan command and control, and supply centers were seized or disrupted. Captured at Drvar were some 161 prisoners and 35 defectors, with some 50 or 60 being transferred to Croat custody (Fowler stated even these did not survive the trip to the rear), leaving some 350 or more killed on the spot. German costs for Knight’s Move state that XVth Mountain Corps had 213 soldiers killed, 881 wounded, and 57 missing. Rybka’s battalion certainly could not be accused of lack of perseverance in their bid to eliminate Tito. One measure of this is that it had lost 576 killed, with 48 wounded, including the disabled commanding officer.¹²⁹

SELECTED GERMAN LESSONS LEARNED¹³²

2d PANZER ARMY

“The operation against the Partisans in Croatia enjoyed considerable success. It succeeded in 1) destroying the core region of the communist Partisans by occupying their command and control centers and their supply installations, thereby considerably weakening their supply situation; 2) forcing the elite communist formations (1st *Proletarian* Division and the 3d *Lika* Division) to give battle and severely battering them, forcing them to withdraw due to the shortage of ammunition and supplies, and avoid further combat (the 9th, 39th, and 4th *Tito* Divisions also suffered great losses); 3) capturing landing fields used by Allied aircraft, administrative establishments, and headquarters of foreign military missions, forcing the Partisans to reorganize and restructure; 4) giving [. . .] a true picture of the combat capability of the Partisans; 5) obtaining important communications equipment, code keys, radios, etc. for our side; 6) achieving these successes under difficult conditions that included numerous enemy air attacks. Whenever the enemy did fight, he seldom fought with ferocity. In spite of the effect of the enemy air operations on the morale of our troops, they fought bravely.”

XV MOUNTAIN CORPS

“*Communications*: In spite of great efforts by all communications personnel, communications did not meet tactical needs. The main problems: complicated radio systems, constant over-taxing of the communications networks, impossibility of making tactical redeployments. On the second day of the operation an important order did not reach the 7th SS until much later, because its radio station was in the process of redeploying.

Luftwaffe: Cooperation with the

Fliegerführung Croatia [Croatian Air Force] was good. The fighter-bomber commitment on 26 May in front of the 373d Infantry Division was decisive in facilitating the advance of this group. A squadron of German [. . .] and captured Italian aircraft with German markings totally destroyed a supply column on the road to Bihac during the return flight.

Secrecy: This deserves special explanation. Before the corps conducted its first orientation, there were rumors concerning the upcoming operation afloat in and around Bihac. The limitations of *Luftwaffe* bombings against Drvar and Petrovac indicated these were the targets of the upcoming operation. In Bihac, a rumor was evident on 23 May that Tito was to be captured. A prisoner of war statement indicated that Tito’s headquarters was aware of the starting day of the operation.

Combat Effectiveness:

373d Infantry Division: Previous experience confirmed that Croatian personnel performed well under strict German supervision for combat operations of short duration.

1st Brandenburg Regiment: There is no doubt as to the courage and combat preparedness of the leadership and all members of this regiment. In spite of this, the regiment was disappointing. This is probably due to the fact that the designation ‘regiment’ is a misnomer.

7th SS and elements of the V SS Army Corps: As the only mountain troops, the SS formations carried the heaviest burden and enjoyed the majority of successes during the operation. Combat readiness of the companies and battalions was good. Clear and precise leadership and prompt reporting are particularly commended.

92d Grenadier Regiment: The leadership of

the regiment did not correspond to the situation at the front. Earlier experiences, where the regiment was loathe to leave the roads, was confirmed. This meant the enemy was not fully pressured.

2d Croatian Light Infantry Brigade: The combat effectiveness of this brigade has not improved. The officers are incapable. Their refusal to deal with all Germans has increased.”

7th SS-MOUNTAIN DIVISION

“Conduct of Operations: Basically, the tactics of the red [Partisan] leadership had to adjust to the German conduct of operations.

It was again confirmed that large-scale operations will only succeed if there are sufficient forces, particularly mountain troops, available. The superior mountain mobility of the Partisans must be overcome by better leadership, training and armament. The objective of the operation must be to destroy the enemy. To achieve this objective, all forces must be committed to the plan and sufficient trucks must be available to transport the reserves.

During Operation ‘*Rosselsprung*,’ the destruction of the enemy was not achieved, because that objective was not the basis for the commitment of forces. The fact is that only mountain troops are capable of destroying the enemy. Motorized advances on the roads leading into enemy territory lose their effect the farther they are separated from their departure bases. Previous experience shows that the enemy simply withdraws into the mountains from roads upon which the motorized formations are advancing, in order to reappear in the rear and disrupt their rear area communications. Temporary destruction of roads and bridges also limits the capability of motorized formations.

In the future, increased activity by Allied air forces against the commitment of motorized

formations on the narrow, barren mountain roads can be expected in the absence of corresponding antiaircraft troops.

The basic combat unit in Partisan warfare is the reinforced *gebirgsjäger* [mountain] battalion. Only it is able to independently achieve the combat mission, without concern for the flank threat. It is able to splinter the enemy and force him to give combat. Only it can be successful against the current numerical superiority enjoyed by the red troops, by taking advantage of the terrain and employing mountain tactics.

The mission of the senior leadership (division and regiments) is to plan the mission and ensure the cooperation of individual units. This is, of course, predicated on the fact that sufficient communications are also available. If a stronger enemy formation withdraws, an active pursuit must be undertaken until the enemy is exhausted and destroyed. Moreover, the tactical reserves must be brought up so that they can be committed on the battlefield in the shortest amount of time possible, relieve the former forces and continue the pursuit. The strength of the pursuit formation is not that important. More important is the unswerving will of the pursuers to allow the enemy no respite. The pursuit of the 1st *Proletarian* Division would have been facilitated, had these principles been adhered to.

Special attention had to be paid to the maintenance of truck transport to carry completely equipped *gebirgsjäger* battalions, including their supply convoys. Only in this manner can the division keep pace with the enemy. Moreover, mobility allows for the commitment of the fully equipped *gebirgsjäger* battalions at the most suitable moment to achieve surprise at locations not considered by the enemy.”



National Capital Historical Sales

Other soldiers at Tito's cave. He and his staff had departed the day before, which was unknown to the attackers. For the next week the Germans continued their offensive as "open season" on Partisans. Special operations have the chance of great achievement, but also the risk of failure, with no middle ground or partial success.

Rybka's replacement, SS-Major Siegfried Milius, noted, "From the battalion commander . . . , down to the lowest rank, all fought with bravery and morale, doing their best against an opponent who was far superior." Decisive, clever leadership and the highest commitment of every soldier were "the prerequisite for success" of the operation.¹³⁰ In the fall 1944, the parachute battalion was re-numbered and grouped with the SS-special forces to fight on as an infantry "fire brigade."¹³¹

The SS-parachute battalion achieved surprise, captured Drvar, and disrupted the Partisan supreme headquarters, but failed to kill or capture Tito (though it was the

closest anyone had gotten to him) while suffering heavy casualties. Operation Knight's Move misfired—barely—for a variety of reasons. A number of lessons are gleaned in the use of tactical units for strategic objectives and the benefit of hindsight provides points for analysis and clarifies earlier misconceptions. Illustrated is that there are no "silver bullets" in war and especially in irregular warfare: direct-action special operations have a high-risk of failure. The significance of this operation was its "modern" approach and elements in common with other special operations missions tailored for surgical precision to accomplish daring goals—Son Tay, Entebbe, Chimoio, Cassinga, Iran's Desert One, Mogadishu, and others. Like these, it was fraught with risk and was a gamble that failed. It is worthy of study in the hopes that political and military leaders will appreciate the benefits and hazards involved.¹³³

Standard requirements for successful airborne operations applied in this case: air superiority, drops zones free of direct enemy fire, and enough arms and equipment to fight on landing. The parachute battalion had a higher proportion of radios and automatic weapons than general-purpose forces, but less ammunition, water, and food. There was also a lack of medical supplies and organic support weapons, being dependent for both on air delivery. For special operations, airborne units possess strategic and operational reach from the air, but have more limited mobility in an objective area—on foot in this example. Also at that time, once committed there were no withdrawal options in the event of failure. Airborne special forces need detailed intelligence of natural and man-

made features in the objective, because they are unfamiliar with the ground on arrival, the same as with amphibious raids, and this will still be a factor in similar efforts.

A Marine Corps Command and Staff College thesis examined this operation and found:

Despite inadequate operational security, the assault of 500 SS *Fallschirmjager* Battalion onto Drvar achieved surprise. Unfortunately for them, faulty intelligence caused them to assault the wrong objective, and poor pre-mission contingency planning ensured they did not recover

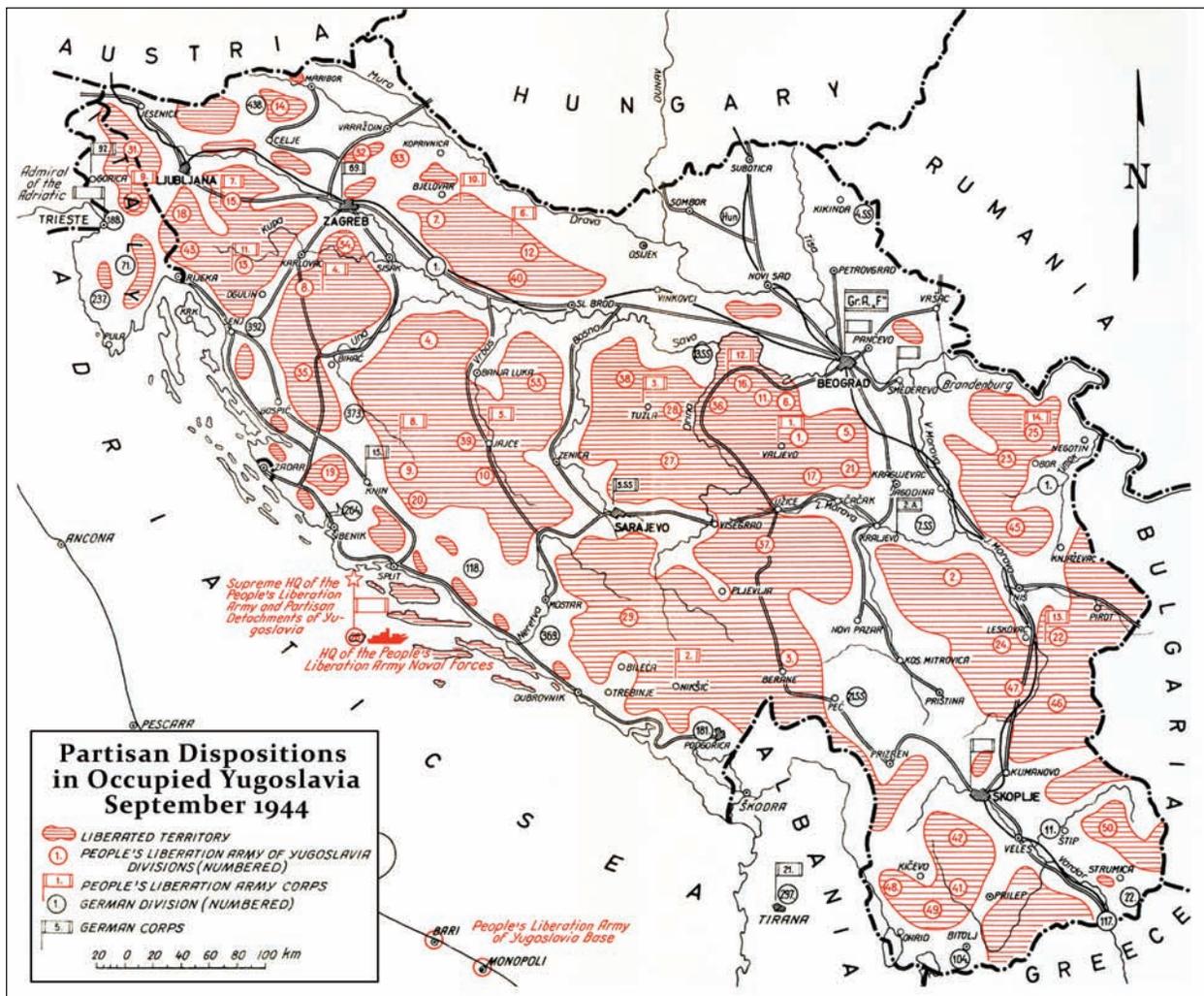
from this error. They did not eliminate Tito and the battalion was virtually destroyed in the process. Had the German intelligence apparatus properly supported them, or if 500 SS had an effective contingency plan to deal with the initial failure to locate Tito, Balkan history could have been significantly different. Fundamental lessons such as these are timeless and must be applied to similar current or future operations to ensure success.¹³⁴

The Partisans suggested that a landing on the plateau above the town would have

Partisans on the move in columns through the ravaged countryside in 1944. Dependent upon Allied supplies and air support to counter German attacks, this year witnessed their greatest test and triumph. The Yugoslav resistance was compromised and split and Tito had to withdraw to Vis. In the end, this just delayed the completion of the war and a continued communist takeover.

U.S. Army (National Archives and Records Administration)





Vojnoizdavaki Zavod

been more effective, as that was the escape route taken by Tito, his staff, and the Allied missions. Considered might have been the use of “hammer and anvil” tactics that would place stop-groups (including attack air) along lines of communications and sending in sweep lines of troops to flush the enemy out as opposed to the German approach that landed forces on the objective itself. Alternative deployments by today’s units would include the use of helicopters or Osprey MV-22 short-landing and take-off

aircraft as well as parachutes.

Special forces commander Skorzeny also dealt with the task of eliminating Tito, without knowing of the planned Knight’s Move attack (apparently OKW and the High Command of the SS were not talking). Skorzeny had arrived in May in Yugoslavia and his subordinates immediately ran into trouble coordinating with local commands. As a result, his sources deduced an attack to occur sometime in June. Signals between Supreme Headquarters, Southeast and

OKW may have been one cause of disclosure as well as overflights of Drvar by reconnaissance aircraft taking photographs from 2,000 feet above-ground-level (Allied Missions mentioned this as a reason for the Partisans expecting an attack and for the relocation of their detachments prior to the assault). As Skorzeny observed, the inability to pin down Tito's location was critical. It meant the 500th SS-Parachute Battalion was unable to exploit surprise and deployed piecemeal in the attempt to catch him. The attackers were so shocked at not finding Tito in Drvar that they later claimed he had been forewarned, a charge later aimed by the Russians at the British and Americans for moving from Drvar days prior to the attack.

Miscalculation of Partisan fighting ability was another factor going into the operation. Germans described the fighting at Drvar as "hard and uncompromising" on both sides. To the Germans, the Partisans did not operate as soldiers in dress, rank, or responsibility but "were simply people who openly carried weapons in violation of international law."¹³⁵ As such, it was impossible to distinguish those killed while resisting or caught under arms from those summarily executed. It was also hard to

separate incidents during the parachute battalion's assault from the subsequent occupation and clearance of the area by other German and Croat units. The conflicting casualty figures indicate this. SS-General Otto Kumm, commanding the 7th SS-Mountain Division, recalled "there was an OKW order that proclaimed for every German soldier murdered . . . finally 100 hostages would be shot." He also believed that many "thousands of innocent people lost their lives during the fighting (especially around the villages) but just as many were killed through reprisals" by the various factions (Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs, and Muslims) throughout.¹³⁶ Differing demands of military necessity and humanity exist in varying forms in the murkiness of "operations-other-than-war" where one side is in uniform and the other is not. Despite harsh handling of Partisans and civilians, the Southeast Command balked at treating captured Allied military personnel (there were three captured newsmen to deal with—one escaped) according to the infamous "commando" order that directed they not be treated as prisoners and subject them to summary execution. This would have put their captured Brandenburg personnel at risk.

Appendix

500/600th SS-PARACHUTE BATTALION CHRONOLOGY

September 1943—500th SS-Parachute Battalion formed by SS High Command for special security missions. Officers and half the enlisted strength were drawn from existing Armed-SS elements, the remainder came on probation. The battalion underwent training with the *Luftwaffe* first at Kraljevo, Yugoslavia, and then Papa, Hungary.

May 1944—Operation Knight's Move; as part of Army Group F and 2d *Panzer* Army, the reinforced battalion parachuted onto Marshal Tito's headquarters at Drvar, Yugoslavia. Tito escaped and the battalion suffered heavy losses.

August 1944—The battalion was reconstituted to participate in the rearguard action in Kurland, Lithuania.

October 1944—Joined the SS-Special Forces under SS-LtCol Skorzeny. Used as a reserve element near Vienna, Austria, for the coup

against Admiral Miklós Horthy in Budapest, Hungary. Redesignated 600th SS-Parachute Battalion, with probationary troops reinstated into the ranks of the Armed-SS.

December 1944—Participated in the Ardennes Offensive as an element of the "Armored Brigade 150" of Skorzeny's infiltrators.

January 1945—Reformed at Neustrelitz, Germany, to serve with Army Group Vistula at the Schwendt bridgehead on the Oder River.

February 1945—Evacuated from Schwendt bridgehead.

March 1945—Established bridgehead near Zennden on the Oder, suffering heavy losses. Reconstituted at Oderberg.

April 1945—Used as a reaction force along the Oder at Bernau, Eberswalde, and Finowfurt. With the rear guard at Prenzlau and Neuruppin. Battalion surrendered at Hagenow, Germany, to American forces.

Notes

¹ OKW, *New York Times*, 7 June 1944, 2.

² Chris Mason, "Falling From Grace: The German Airborne in World War II," Masters of Military Studies thesis (Quantico: USMC Command and Staff College, 2001), 38.

³ This monograph is revised and expanded from a conference paper; "Red Sun: A German Airborne Raid, May 1944;" delivered at the Society for Military History Meeting, April 2000, Marine Corps University, Quantico, VA.

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has relevant copies of German armed forces documents in Records Groups T311 (rolls 187-97, 285-86), T313 (rolls 78-221, 482-88), T315 (roll 2112) and T514 (rolls 563-65). Published primary sources include Adolf Kunzmann and Siegfried Milius, *Fallschirmjager der Waffen-SS im Bild* (Osnabruck: Munin Verlag, 1986) written by a former war reporter and battalion commander from the unit scrapbook now in private hands; also Otto Kumm, *Prinz Eugen: The History of the 7th SS-Mountain Division "Prinz Eugen"* (Winnipeg: J. J. Fedorowicz, 1995). Previous English language popular accounts of this operation were by Charles Whiting, James S. Lucas, and Antonio J. Munoz. My obligation and disagreement with their narratives have been noted. Of these, German 500/600th Parachute Battalion commander Siegfried Milius commented in a letter to Eric Queen dated 25 January 1991 that in his opinion "a writer of fiction has written a text on the jump at Drvar as he imagined it, and many people simply copied him." Other useful references include Eric Busch, *Die Fallschirmjager Chronik, 1935-45* (Frieberg: Podzun Pallas Verlag, 1983); Bundesverband der Soldaten der Ehemaligen Waffen-SS, *Wenn Alle Bruder Schweigen* (Osnabruck: Munin Verlag,

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⁶ OKW, *Bands*, 203.

⁷ SS-Führungshauptamt, *Werwolf, Winke fur Jagdeinheiten* (Berlin: January 1945), ed. and trans. by Michael C. Fagnon, as *SS Werwolf: Combat Instruction Manual* (Boulder: Paladin Press, 1982), 59.

⁸ Bruce Condell and David T. Zabecki, eds. and trans., *On the German Art of War: Truppenfuhrung* (Boulder: Lynne Reinner, 2001), 243.

⁹ OKW, *Bands*, 212-22; Dixon and Heilbrunn, 113-63.

¹⁰ OKW, *Bands*, 203.

¹¹ Dixon and Heilbrunn, 126-28.

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- ¹⁴ Dixon and Heilbrunn, 122–23.
- ¹⁵ OKW, *Bands*, 219–20.
- ¹⁶ OKW, *Bands*, 203.
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- ²⁴ MacLean, *Heretic*, 240.
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- ²⁸ Kumm, 116.
- ²⁹ Josip Broz Tito, *Selected Military Works* (Belgrade: Vojnoizdavacki Zavod, 1966), 330; DAPam 20-243, 20–30.
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- ³⁵ 500th SS-Parachute Battalion movement order dated 20 May 1944; 500th SS-Parachute Battalion supplementary order dated 20 May 1944 (NARA).
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⁶³ Fowler, 3; Pribichevich, 132.

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