

No Picnic in Oranienburg

A WWII Article for C-P Models

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Chaos! troops retreating on all fronts! The 3rd SS Panzer Corps under the command of SS General Steiner was fighting for its very existence. The Soviet spring offensive against the German Front line on the River Oder finally tore through the weak German defences on the 19th of April 1945.

Marshal Zhukov's forces were advancing on Berlin. SS General Steiner's command of foreigners and reserve troops were fragmented and in a total state of collapse. But were now called upon to block the Red Armies advance in to Germany. This scenario describes one such action during the last desperate days of WWII.

Introduction

SS General Steiner's III SS Panzer Corp was by the 19th of April 1945 a Corp with no troops. It's most celebrated units the SS 'Nordland' Division was fighting for its life in the ruins of the German capital and the SS 'Nederland' Division was scattered to the Four Corners of the Weichsel, (Vistula) front fighting with distinction as the German Army in the North fought its desperate delaying action.

When the CI Corps flank was turned on the fourth day of Zhukov's offensive it successfully disengaged, retreated and dug its forces in around the town of Eberwalde.

Steiner's depleted III SS Panzer Corp was promised new troops and ordered by OKW the supreme high command in Berlin to launch a counterattack against Belov's 61st Army between Liebenwalde and Zerpenschleuse, it was hoped by the German high command that the attack would inflict a crushing defeat on the Allies, thus creating the conditions for a relief of the German capital Berlin. Before this could happen, the Soviet bridgeheads across the Hohenzollern canal had to be eliminated.

The 61st Red Army and the 1st Polish Army under the command of Lt. General Stanislaw Poplowski reached the River Havel by the 22nd of April. Their tired, but exuberant forces now sought crossings over the Hohenzollern canal; Once they got across the canal Army Group 'Vistula' was in danger of having its weak western flank turned.

If the Fuhrer's planned counter-attack to relieve Berlin by the III SS Corp was to go ahead

the Polish threat on the canal had to be eliminated. Steiner was ordered to crush the enemy forces crossing the canal.

Polish Bridgehead

Hungry for victory the 1st Polish Army threw its makeshift bridges across the River Havel on the 22nd of April 1945 and advanced westward toward the River Elbe. Along its northern flank stretched the Ruppiner Canal defended by the remnants of III SS Panzer Corp and the CI Corp.

In two days the Army advanced almost 45 Km before forces of the 12th Army halted the Polish armoured advance temporarily at Linum and Konigshorst. Steiner's Corp had swelled in size with the scrapings of the German military to include, (west to east along the canal) the 115th Panzer Recon Battalion, Kampfgruppe Harzer, Kampfgruppe 'Schirmer' and finally group 'Wolf'.

The Polish 1st Army launched a sudden attack across the Ruppiner canal near Oranienburg and Sachsenhausen on the night of the 22th/23rd of April. Steiner threw in the last troops in reserve, a battlegroup composed of the 9th Naval Infantry Regiment and a SS Battalion composed of men combed out from the 103rd SS Feld-Ausbildung Regiment. This ad Hoc force had orders to destroy the enemy forces crossing the canal.

German Forces involved in this Scenario

The 3rd Naval Division was created from the remnants of the 163rd Infantry Division, (destroyed in the battle for Pommerania during March 1945). Based in Wollin the Division was commanded by Generalmajor Von Witzleben and was composed of men combed out from Kreigsmarine shore and training units.

The 3rd Naval Division was seriously delayed by Allied bombing so that only two Marine Battalions reached Steiner by the 22nd of April 1945.

Once they reached Steiner's command the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 9th Marine Infantry Regiment were combined with a reserve SS Battalion under the command of SS Captain Thomalla. This had been raised from the 103rd SS Field Training Regiment.

Many men came from specialist courses such as signals and anti-tank gun training centres. SS Captain Thomalla was able to form a *March* company from such men under the command of SS Lt Hecker.

He formed a second company using 80 SS NCO's under arrest for dereliction of duty. This Probationary Company was placed under the command of SS Lt Klostermann.

The SS Battalion took point with the two Naval Battalions, (mentioned earlier) following. Along the way a rag tag of Volkssturm and Hitler Youth volunteers joined them to hold Oranienburg.

The II Battalion FLAK Regiment 14 and the 1st Battery FLAK Battalion Reichsführer SS supported the Naval Kampfgruppe, (commander unknown).

These are the units that will form the German force during this scenario.

Polish Forces involved in this scenario

The 2nd Polish Infantry Division participated in the attack across the Ruppiner-Hohenzollern Canal supported by armour from the 61st Army. This unit had been raised during the spring of 1944 at Sumy in the Soviet Union.

The Division has received orders from the 1st Polish Peoples Army commander, (cc. Gen. Stanislaw Poplawski) to secure the Armies northern flank along the Hohenzollern canal and if possible cross and hold bridgeheads for future Red Army exploitation.

As Soviet forces advance westward they will relieve your force so you can continue the advance westward to the Elbe River.

The Table top scenario

This is a classic bridge taking action. The German player is tasked with capturing the bridge within 20 moves as a prelude to the main assault across the canal.

Polish Orders and deployment

You command a Polish Infantry Regiment of three Battalions, Engineer, (bridge building) Company and a three T-34/85 tanks from the Soviet 61st Army.

Your engineers have built a makeshift bridge across the canal enemy resistance has been negligible. Your Battalion is dug in around the pontoon bridge on the northern bank and has orders to protect the crossing at all costs.

You have no regimental artillery; this has been left behind in the mad dash westwards!

German orders and deployment

You command a battle group composed of two Marine Battalions and a Reserve SS Battalion; your mission is to counter-attack a Polish Army bridgehead across the Hohenzollern canal.

Deploy your three Battalions on the Northern edge of the table and must march in single column south to the canal, led by the SS Battalion. The terrain is flat and agricultural. The landscape is dotted with small woods, streams and smallholdings.

The wide canal is crossed by a wooden pontoon bridge and the Polish forces have constructed shallow trenches, but no bunkers.

Your orders are to capture the bridge and houses on the north bank.

Victory conditions

The player holding the farm house on the north side of the canal after 20 moves is the winner of the battle.

Rules

For a fast and conclusive game I would recommend Rapid Fire if you are using 20mm scale figures?

Figure Notes

The Marine infantry wore the field Grey M42/M44 uniform with naval insignia. Many at this time of year also wore winter overalls, both plain and camouflage variants.

The probationary SS NCOs wore the 'normal' range of SS uniform and camouflage garments, but would probably not of had any collar insignia. It is possible that the NCO and officer cadre wore the crossed rifles and grenade collar badge on both collars, this is often associated with the Dirlwanger Unit, but was also often worn by many probationers in SS punishment units.

Historical Conclusion

On the 23rd of April using a mix force of pioneers and Volkssturm amounting to the equivalent of seven infantry battalions Steiner as ordered, launched a pathetic counter-attack to close the gap between Army Group Vistula and the German garrison in Berlin.

His weak force managed to wrest the town of Klosterfelde off the Soviets for a short time until Col General Belov organised an attack that pushed the German force back to its start line. Steiner dug his surviving troops in and

bolstered his weak line with reserve troops. The attack failed to deliver the promised relief of Berlin or create the necessary conditions for a final victory.

By the end of April 1945 the whole of the battered 3rd Panzerarmee and group 'Steiner' was in retreat to the Allied demarcation line, using defensive techniques learned over many years in the east, the German's used their sparse armour to cover the infantry's retreat to the demarcation line.

Many of the 3rd Panzerarmee and Group 'Steiner' escaped Soviet capture and many years in the Soviet Gulag. The men of the 103rd SS *BewarungsKompanie* were all pardoned and rehabilitated before the end of the war; many escaped west and became captives of the British Army after crossing the River Elbe.

The 9th Marine Regiment was terribly mauled during a counter-attack on the Soviet positions, but its raw troops acquitted themselves well; its survivors also took part in the march westward to the demarcation line.

Postscript

At the end of the war the German Army relied more and more on raw training units to bolster the crumbling front line.

Units of inexperienced troops often led by veteran NCOs and officers performed well against the Soviet Army, (its self often composed of raw half-trained infantryman) despite the lack of support weapons and trained soldiers, but their lack of numbers and heavy weapons made their a hopeless battle.

The different troop's field by Steiner's Army make an interesting addition to the WWII tabletop battlefield.

Selected Biography

The Road to Berlin – Erickson
The Tragedy of the Faithful – W. Tieke
Das Ende Zwischen Oder und Elbe – W. Tieke
The battle for Berlin – Le Tissier
Poles on the fronts of WWII – S. Baluk

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