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THE 47 VOLKSGRENADIERDIVISION (VGD)

IN THE WEST

The 47 Volksgrenadier Division (VGD) in the West During the 3rd battle of Aix-la-Chapelle (16 Nov 1944 - 4 Jan 1945)

Part I

Map 1:50000

The commitment of the 47 VGD in the 3rd battle of Aix-la-Chapelle is a typical example of the inappropriate use only partly caused by the overall situation - but unfortunately often resorted to newly constituted troops which, though well equipped in personnel and material, were insufficiently trained due to the lack of time and training facilities and had no combat experience. This division in particular proved in the further course of the war that in spite of all exigencies of the time, and despite the heavy losses suffered during its first commitment (104 officers and 4260 men), it was capable of accomplishing all tasks both in respect of command and combat, and equipment, once the neglected training had been completed and combat experience gained.

1. Formation of the Division

The initial organization of the Division began at the end of Sept 1944 at the troop training camp Wildflecken. Half of its personnel strength was formed by transfers from the Luftwaffe and the Navy; a third was composed of conscripted youths, 17 and 18 years old, and one third of older aged classes of the Army who had seen

service in the East. The Officers Corps was especially selected by the personnel office - the P7 - expressly established by the OKW for the VGD's. All commanders and half of the younger officers had experience on the Eastern front and the rest were retrained from the Army and the Luftwaffe (Signal Corps, Flak, Administration Officers). Unfortunately, the troops lacked all the traditional and local national cohesion.

While weapons and material were up to date, they were received in such limited quantity, that training had to be carried out preferrably in theory, in spite of the favorable conditions presented by a troop training camp. At this juncture heavy equipment, guns of all kind, mobile antitank guns had not even yet been assigned on paper. Furthermore, there was the unfavorable transport situation in Germany. At the beginning of October, just when the Division Commander had succeeded through his personal influence in getting heavy equipments dispatched to Wildflecken, the Division was transferred to the northern part of Denmark to continue its organization transfer commencing on 6 October. There they were for the greater part spread out in companies over an area extending 200 km and found no training facilities available. To explore such possibilities and acquire them in wearisome negotiation with the authorities again took up precious time. However, much worse was the loss of time caused by rerouting the heavy equipment transports. Thus, for example, the bulk of guns of the Artillery Regiment arrived only 8 days before the commitment, the artillery command transmitter

only during the battle of Aix-la-Chapelle, the draught horses of the medium artillery battalion and the entire harness, etc., of the horses of the Division only during the days of transport movement and the mobile antitank guns only on 20 Nov. The effect upon the fighting power of the Division is obvious. Its weakness was from the outset in artillery and antitank defense. And that when facing the armored enemy of the West!

The fact that - in spite of these circumstances - training of the Division by November could be advanced to the stage of exercises on reinforced regiment level with combined weapons and using live ammunition is the best evidence of the willingness and efficiency of all officers. If the Division had been granted the additional 14 days training period requested and if the replacement training battalion that was lacking and Divisional combat school had been activated, the most serious defects would have been removed. As it was, however, transport to the West front began on 9 Nov after only 6 weeks of training. In spite of enemy air supremacy it was possible to detrain the bulk of the Division at railway stations located near the front line. An artillery battalion being lost at Fuelich and parts of the means of conducting commands during the air-raid on Dueren on 16 Nov. The low level of training in the Division being out of proportion to the high quality of men, the Division Commander requested they be committed in the West Wall. This was promised at first, but plans were altered during transport. The troops, after having been detrained mostly by

battalion, were immediately thrown into the big operation of the 3rd battle of Aix-la-Chapelle. The order of battle of the Division at this moment is shown in the annex (see annex 1).

2. The Course of Battle

16 November. Initiation of all commanders in the combat position:

The Division was to relieve the bulk of the 12 VGD and parts of the 275 Infantry Division in the sector Scherpenseel - Schevenhuette. The enemy air force had its main day of attack with points of main effort towards the future Division sector. In spite of its magnitude and power - 5500 planes - this air-raid carried only few losses among the assembled troops but unfortunately the first officers were lost, namely members of the parties of guides, and a very serious loss was that of the III/ A-R-147 which was just then detraining.

During the night of 16/17 Nov, the bulk of the Division moved into position. On the 16 Nov the troops then holding the position had been engaged in a heavy battle. During the attack Gressenich was lost to the 1st American Infantry Division (Inf-Rgt 26) and Werth and Kotteinch to the 3rd Armored Division. The units of the 12 and 275 Divisions had not yet been reorganized after these attacks. The regiments of the 47 VGD carrying out the relief were unable to locate all the troops formerly holding the position in spite of prepared plans. To some extent the handing over did not take place according to schedule. Therefore, on the morning of 17 Nov, they were located in 77PW terrain, facing the difficulties of forest fighting, a form of fighting they had not

been trained for in Denmark, where there are no forests. The arranging of units in the position was rendered difficult by this thickly wooded terrain and the continuous harassing fire and signal communications were unreliable from the start. In the midst of these difficulties came the enemy attack by the 1st American Infantry Division and the 3rd Armored Division along the whole length of the front, on 17 Nov.

17 November. In spite of desperate resistance by the 103 Grenadier Regiment, the enemy penetrated into the southern part of Hastenrath and Scherpenseel. On the other hand the 104 Grenadier Regiment repulsed two tank attacks against Hamich. The 115 Grenadier Regiment defended itself without difficulty against thrusts by the 26 Infantry Regiment in the forest of Wenau, established the lacking communications and connections in the thick underbrush and installed themselves in the forest position. Men and means were lacking for the construction of a continuous position, so that a system of strongpoint-defense- which is unfavorable in forests- had to be adopted. As the heights east of Gressenich were already in enemy territory, this regiment was from its first combat day without effective observation positions of any kind. Therefore, the operation resolved itself into local fights around each strong-point.

18 November. Hastenrath and Scherpenseel were lost in spite of 49 disabled enemy tanks. The 103 Grenadier Regiment was able to re-establish itself in the heights north-east of it and repel the pursuing 3rd Armored Division. While a new attack was repulsed at the northern part of Hamich, the central observation position of the artillery, the

decisive heights 232 was lost. Approximately 250 dead and wounded of the 104 Grenadier Regiment were left behind in the position. A counter-thrust launched in the evening by the I/104 supported by a combat team of the 116 Panzer Division (5 tanks with an Engineer Company), to re-capture this height, failed after some initial success. Thus the garrison at Hamich was isolated and deprived of artillery support. A request by the Division to the LXXXI A-K, to evacuate Hamich during the darkness and establish the 104 Grenadier Regiment in a new position on the height 225, was refused. As was unfortunately always the case with such requests, the fate of the 104 Grenadier Regiment in Hamich was thus sealed.

19 November. In spite of desperate resistance, towards 1200 hours Hamich fell during an enemy attack executed concentrically from South to West. According to their own records, the enemy lost 1043 men in this battle. The remnants of the garrison, attempting to fight their way through to Wenau, were annihilated where they met the American 26 Infantry Regiment pushing forward in the wooded area east of Hamich. Thus a whole battalion had to be written off. Only one battalion now remained available in the regimental sector 104 and it was committed for the defense of Heistern and Wenau as a precautionary measure. Although the entire Engineer Battalion of the Division was needed and committed at this moment for obstacle construction in the forest positions, it had to be brought forward as Division reserves in the region of point 203 (southwest of Langerwche) because the impending break-through towards Langerwche was indicated by the concentration of enemy

reinforcements observed in the area of Hamich (the 18 Inf. Rgt.) on the evening of 19 Nov., the breakthrough that unhinged the whole front of the LXXXI A-K as far as Eschweiler, and furthermore because the combat team of the 116 Panzer Division, until they subordinated to the Division, had to be transferred at this very moment and placed at the disposal of the Corps. With the removal of this group the antitank defense of the Division depended exclusively upon the 12 guns of the I/A-R 147 which had to be brought forward for this purpose and hence could not be used for artillery tasks. At this time the Division artillery was composed of only one light and one medium battalion. Furthermore, 3 light and one medium batteries were assigned as reinforcement artillery making a total of 18 light and 9 medium guns ready for action which number was insignificent considering the decisive task of the Division.

In the meantime, the bulk of the 3rd Armored Division had penetrated into the southern part of the Bovenberg forest and advanced from there, in the late afternoon, to the new front of the 103 Grenadier Regiment which extended from the heights 2 km. south of Bovenberg to the edge of the wood 2 km. east of it. However, the attack was repelled. Here also an enemy break-through towards Huchelu and then into the south flank of the 12 VGD was indicated for the next day. Therefore, the last infantry reserve of the 47 Division - FuesCp 147-had to be committed as support of the key-point Huchelu, a totally inadequate force to face an Armored Division. Therefore the report of the evening 19 Nov. to the LXXXI A-K urgently called for reinforcement of infantry

and above all antitank defense. This was refused.

19 to 22 November. While enemy attack activities in the forest of Wenau (northeast Schevenhuette) increased on 19 Nov. they could be well controlled by the 115 Regiment until 22 Nov. There too, the casualities amongst the troops who were inexperienced in forest combat increased, due to the nature of the fighting in a terrain very difficult to survey. In addition there was a constant menace to the south wing of the regiment because the neighboring Division failed to maintain contact, and this menace could only be removed by committing a contact detachment west of the estate of Hardt along the road Guerzuirch - Schevenhuette a measure that should have been taken by the south neighboring Division. As it was the measures taken resulted perforce in the weakening of the 115 Regiment.

20 November. Enemy assaults against the sector of the 103 Grenadier Regiment were repelled. Here, however, the enemy obviously reinforced their tank strength. Artillery fire and attacks by fighter bombers were concentrating to such an extent on the heights south of Bovenberg that the losses of the regiment amounted to nearly 200 men for this day alone. Local evasive movements, which the situation demanded, were prohibited as usual.

In sector 104, the battle was raging since day-break with renewed violence. In the morning already, Wenau fell into the hand of the newly inserted American 18 Infantry Regiment. In the evening, the enemy, supported by 25 tanks, penetrated into the southern part of Heistern. As the enemy had good observation into Langerwche, from

Heistern, the Division had to attempt to throw him back. All available elements of the 104 Grenadier Regiment with a strength of 2 companies, one Engineer Company and three tanks that had been left behind, were brought forward for counterthrust by the 104 Commander during moonlight. The counterthrust failed after some initial success. After capturing the severely wounded commander of the regiment and after the bulk of the position troops was annihilated - 250 dead - the enemy followed up and completely occupied Heistern by morning of 21 Nov.

21 November. With hurriedly raked up elements the 104 Regiment, now under the command of the Division Adjutant, with difficulty sealed off the line extending from the forest north of Heistern to Schoeuthal. It was obvious that the fighting on the following day would take place around the last dominating height "Kammerbusch". For this reason the Division assigned a special strong-point commander to there on the evening of 21 Nov., to whom were subordinated the 147 Engineer Battalion and the first elements of the mobile antitank company of the 147 antitank battalion company which had arrived at last.

The blocking of the road in the valley Wenau - Langerwche so strengthened by tree abatis and the use of the last lines of the Division that the enemy (II/18) was stopped at heavy losses on 21 and 22 Nov., and discontinued further attacks until 27 Nov. On the other hand he was reinforced in the forest east of Schoenthal where only one platoon strength contact detachment of the 115 Regiment was located. After repeated and urgent requests of the Division, the LXXXI Corps now when it was really too late put one combat experienced battalion of the corps reserve at

the disposal of the Division, which was committed there and in an energetic forest attack established a secure contact between the 104 and the 105 Grenadier Regiment. But seen in sector 103 the position on the Bovenberg heights fell into enemy hands in the evening of same day after a concentrated artillery fire by about 60 enemy batteries lasting three hours. The enemy found 172 dead in the position. The second commander of the battalion was killed in action, the regimental commander reported himself sick on the battle field. Neither could be replaced. The remaining combat strength of the regiment, including the Division Rifle Company amounted to two officers and 228 men who were assembled into two strong-points around the estate of Bovenberg east of Hucheln. Signal contact with 103 and 104 was severed owing to heavy losses of equipment. The motorcycle messenger detachment of the Division had lost half of its equipment as the result of heavy artillery fire on the few communication roads. The officers of the Division Staff were the only means of communication left.

22 to 26 November. It was possible to repel enemy attacks repeated frequently each day against Kammerbusch. The securing of this point by the 147 Engineer Battalion proved good. Enemy artillery fire and fighter bombers covered this part of the position almost without pause. A daily expenditure of ammunition of 8000 rounds of artillery and 1000 bombs was not exceptional.

Meanwhile, Nothberg had been lost in the sector of the neighboring Division on the right and the enemy had pierced from the West to Hucheln. On 24 Nov. the 103 Grenadier Regiment succumbed to

this attack which was combined with a thrust from the south via Bovenberg to Hucheln, carried out by the 3rd Armored Division. Remnants of the regiment assembled in Frenzenburg and were subordinated to the 12 VGD. That the enemy did not pierce Langerwche on 25 Nov. and thereby caused the fall of the Kammerbusch - position is certainly due only to the insufficiency of the American reconnaissance, as the Division did not succeed in filling the gap near Hucheln.

Fighting continued in the woods sector of the 115 Grenadier Regiment. Two enemy companies which penetrated by surprise into the castle of Merode were cut off and annihilated. It was possible to hold the positions in the woods, however, more or less in the line extending from point 245 (1 km. west of Merode) to point 278 (2 km. west of Hardt) fluctuating combat with heavy losses to both sides.

<u>27 November</u>. Kammerbusch fell during a concentrated enemy attack, carried out in the early morning, after the commander of the 147 Engineer Battalion acting as strong-point commander, was severely wounded and put out of action. The American followed up in two attack groups, the westerly group of which penetrated into the southern spurs of mountains of Langerwche; the eastern group entered Fuengersdorf. The most advanced battalion of the 3 F.S. Division which was being brought up to relieve the 47 VGD, encountered the approaching armored attack and was annihilated.

In retrospect it has to be stated that it was only the heavy losses the Americans suffered during the battle of Kammerbusch that reduced their power to such an extent (I Inf. Div. reported 581 casualties

on 26 and 27 Nov. alone that they were not able to pierce through Fuengersdorf to Dueren on the same day, so that the 3 F.S. Division succeeded in closing the gap during the night of 27/28 Nov.

In the same night, the 47 VGD, badly mauled, but also hardened by 11 days of most severe combat, was relieved and transferred into the area Wollersheim - Sinzenich - Vlatten (southwest of Zuelpich) for re-conditioning by order of the LXXIX A-K (7th Army). The command post was in Buervenich. It was now of utmost importance to rapidly bring up the necessary replacements, to incorporate them and to improve without delay the level of training which was still bad at this moment.

29 November to 11 December. The urgently necessary organization and training could not be carried out owing, firstly, to the immediate commitment of all battle worthy portions of the Division into a covering position of Kreuzen - Wutermanback behind the Roer, by order of the LXXIX A-K, and secondly to delay in the arrival of the replacements. In order to bring into position the three required battalions fit for combat, it became necessary to press every officer, Sergeant or rifleman able to carry a weapon, into these battalions. The cadres of the II Battalions of the regiments were thus practically dissolved. When arrival of 3000 men replacements reported, the Division proposed that this static - regiment be pulled out again and used to reestablish the old cadres and units rendering them fit for receiving replacements. Unfortunately this request was without success. The replacement actually arriving on 8 Dec. could therefore only be provisionally incorporated into the organization. In companies brought up to full

strength no one knew each other while their being welded together by training or experience was entirely out of the question. They were merely masses of people with no uniting bonds. Any criticism would be superfluous.

In this condition the Division received the new order of operation. To go back to the hot spot at Dueren where the 3 Parachute Division, during 11 days of combat, had been as badly exhausted as the 47 VGD was in November. All illusions to the condition of the Division was vigorously suppressed. The order of operation was wrongly transmitted by the LXXIX A-K and as a result the Division Commander was burdened by the corps and the Army with tedious investigations most dangerous in circumstances, so that the Division, not yet uniform, was brought into position at first with only one Infantry Regiment into a position the exact outlay of which as a result of constant heavy enemy attacks, could only be determinated at the moment of relief.

12 December. In the night of 11/12 Dec. the 104 Grenadier Regiment relieved troops in the sector of Hoven - Mariaweiler. At day-break the regiment was caught there in an attack by two enemy Infantry Regiments and one combat command. Hoven was lost in the first onslaught battle for Mariaweiler raging until evening. The enemy who had penetrated there during the afternoon was forced back into the eastern parts of the locality in a counterthrust by the II/104. However, the force of this battalion did not suffice for a complete mopping-up of the locality because the available antitank defense was

insufficient, due to the premature blasting of the guns there of a medium Heeres - antitank - defense - battalion which was under direct command of the LXXXI Corps.

13 and 14 December. The continued enemy attack of 13 Dec. again threw the elements of the 104 Grenadier Regiment which had been beaten in the local fighting out of Mariaweiler. However, the regiment succeeded in holding the Gruenthal factory and in providing cover for the blowing of the Roer railroad - bridge.

The 115 Regiment adjoining on the south, which had relieved during the night of 13 Dec., was engaged during this time in heavy defensive combat against the 83 American Infantry Division in and around Guerzenich reinforced by a combat command attacking from the direction of Hardt. There, also, the medium antitank defense guns had been blown up. Nevertheless, in spite of being attacked from three sides the regiment held its position until midday on 15 Dec. When at Birgel, the reserve battalion of the 47 Division, by order of the LXXXI Corps, had to launch a * diverging (executive) counterattack out of Rochlsdorf in the late afternoon of 14 Dec. without any tank support and over a sparsely covered terrain, in order to re-capture this locality. It was wrong to leave this battalion subordinated to the 47 Division during this operation, as this Division was unable to provide support during this attack.

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* Exaentrischer Angriff - an attack launched away from the general line of attack.

Nevertheless, the counterthrust succeeded at first but then the battalion was cut off at Birgel where it held out until the 15 Dec. and destroyed four enemy tanks with Panzerfausts before being annihilated. Another one-sixth of the Infantry of the Division was lost and the southern flank of the Division was now without protection.

15 and 16 December. The battle for Guerzenich surged to and fro with attacks and counterattacks alternating inside of the extended village which was very difficult to survey, and terminated on the evening of 15 Dec. when a new front was established around Rochlsdorf which held out through 16 Dec. When, on 16. Dec., the 104 Regiment retired behind the Roer and the garrison of Rochlsdorf was engaged in a hopeless battle, it was impossible to carry out the orders of higher commands, namely, to hold all bridgeheads, regardless of how unimportant they might be, which orders were constantly repeated in spite of the situation.

17 December. The authorization to cross the river only arrived during the evening of this day. During the night of 17 Dec., the Division assembled behind the Roer with its right wing at the demolished Autobahn bridge and the left wing at Krauthausen - South. The prepared position was completely unusable in spite of contrary assertions. On account of the dammed-up water of the Roer, the so-called front trench was deeply flooded.

The Division now had to prepare for a containing attack across the Roer in connection with the Ardennes - Offensive. In spite of the

condition of the Division, it was possible to accomplish this task by the date fixed owing to the energy with which it was undertaken, the skill at improvising and the fact that the enemy did not follow up across the river. Every soldier in the Division was convinced of the importance of his share in this final great German offensive, although the available forces of the Division were too weak for an effective pinning-down operation and the tactical conditions were unfavorable after the crossing of the Roer because of the narrow front of attack which immediately led to an outflanking on both sides. Time during the days prior to the attack was taken up with constant reconnaissance work over the floodwaters of the river; with preparing emergency construction material, with training in stream crossings at night and with adjustment firing by the artillery and heavy weapons.

19 December. At day-break on 19 Dec., the Division assembled across the river under the protection of smoke on both sides of the Dueren roads and railway bridges. The crossing went smoothly. The troops dodged the enemy defensive fire and the battle was carried forward into the local districts of Roerfeld and Rochlsdorf. The narrowness of the battle field, caused by numerous accumulations of high water, channled the attacks into narrow and deep areas. On the afternoon of this day it had already become clear that the far-reaching objectives of attack, far set by the higher command, could never be attained without re-inforcements. Still, the Division made prisoners, put some tanks out of action and captured material. In the evening,

however, the Division was located in the line Gruenthal - Guerzenich - North - Rochlsdorf - South entirely exhausted. After seven of the mobile antitank guns made available for the attack had been put out of action, all of which were salvaged, however, with the exception of one.

20 December 1944 to 5 January 1945. During 20 Dec., the Division resisted numerous enemy counterattacks. During the night of 20/21 Dec., they were withdrawn to their line of departure. During the following days they were able there to defend enemy reconnaissance thrusts. However, since no large-scale operations took place, they now had the opportunity of assigning their replacements, which had been impossible at the beginning of Dec., and to carry out training in position. But above all it was now possible to appoint capable noncoms who had been trained meanwhile by the replacement training battalion organized in the field under great difficulty. The spirit and morale of the Division rose considerably within a few days, principally due to the replacement of officers which finally filled up the gap in the rows of commanders and company grade officers. So the Division was again fit for combat on 5 Jan. in spite of the immense blood-letting. It was then pulled out and started on the march across the Rhine for other assignments and thereby separated from the 15th Army.

3. Synopsis.

During the 3rd battle of Aix-la-Chapelle, the Division, fighting in most unfavorable position and against an enemy many

times superior, suffered losses which were unusually heavy even for that time. The reasons are stated clearly in the above manuscript and are irrefutable. In spite of these losses its weak remnants, mostly gathered as combat teams around their respective regimental commanders, continued fighting in the hopeless situation of this battle. They prevented enemy break-throughs and in this way helped to avoid a premature commitment of the German Divisions provided for the Ardennes Offensive. Though at heavy sacrifice the Division on the battle field acquired the combat experience and discipline which enabled them to perform their duty until the day of armistice as one of the few German Divisions in the West.

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