

THE SLOVENIAN PARTISAN CAMPAIGN OF 1944

JANEZ SVAJNCER

In Yugoslavia today there is only one army, with only one language - Serbian - but during World War II the Slovenian nation had its own Slovenian Partisan Army with its own Command Staff, which, from the autumn of 1942, came under the Supreme Staff of Tito's Partisan Army. The name of this Slovenian Army was "Narodnoosvobodilna vojska in partizanski odredi Slovenije" (National Liberation Army and Partisan Units of Slovenia), in short: NOV and POS. The basic partisan units were "brigades," which consisted of from 500 to between 2000 to 3000 partisans. During the times of the hardest fighting there were less men per unit, and in relatively peaceful times there were more. The first and most famous of these units, right up to the present day, was the "First Shock Brigade Tone Tomšič," named for the killed Slovenian Communist Party leader. This brigade was established on 16 July 1942 in territory occupied by Italian troops. A specially nice banner for this brigade was manufactured in an illegal workshop in Ljubljana (capital of Slovenia) in the summer of 1942. Before this banner could be delivered to the brigade, it was discovered by the Italians in an illegal bunker. For the Italians, this was a "great" victory over the partisan brigade, and this banner is now in one of the Italian museums.

A Slovenian Partisan Division, the 14th Division of the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia, was created in the summer of 1943. This division consisted of the 1st Shock Brigade Tone Tomšič, the 2nd Shock Brigade Ljubo Šercer (named for the Royal Yugoslav officer, a Slovene, who led one of the first partisan units in Slovenia in 1941, and who commanded the attack on the town of Lož, was captured by the Italians, and shot), and the 13th Shock Brigade Mirko Bračič (named for the Slovenian partisan commandant killed in action in 1943). This division fought some hard battles in the autumn of 1943. That winter, the division received the order to march to Štajerska, in the northern part of Slovenia, near the Austrian border. Maribor is the capital of this area. The Germans had been in Štajerska since 1941, conducting a campaign of hard terror. The Division was sent to help the local partisans.

The eastern part of Štajerska consists of small hills, but the western part is mountainous, with hard cold winters and high snow. The Division Staff knew what to expect in Štajerska, and how hard the going would be to this area in the winter. Therefore all the partisans who were too old or too weak to stand the rigors of this march were left behind in Bela Krajina, from where the division started. Only volunteers were allowed on this long hard march. Those who went with the division numbered 1100 men with two guns, twenty trench mortars, 37 machine guns, 180 submachine guns, and 900 rifles. The Commanders of the division were the national heroes Jože Klanjšek-Vasja and Tone Vidmar-Luka. Also included were a member of the Slovenian NOV and POS Staff, national hero Viktor Avbelj-Rudi (who is now President of the Republic of Slovenia), and a Commissar, Matevž Hace (who was, before his death in 1979, a famous Slovenian writer).



SNOW AND COLD AS THE DIVISION CROSSES THE MOUNTAINS



DIVISION STAFF ON FEBRUARY 8, 1944.
OFFICERS' ARMS WERE CAPTURED FROM DEAD GERMAN SOLDIERS

The division started its march from Bela Krajina, in southern Slovenia, on January 6, 1944. The first part of the march was largely through Croatia, with the division arriving on the border of Stajerska on February 7, 1944. In this first month, 100 partisans were lost in the fighting. Now the really tough times were about to begin. The Germans had established a special staff for dealing with this partisan unit. Its Commander was Colonel Dr. Egon von Treck, who before coming to Slovenia had served on the eastern front against the Russians. He had 2843 troops, with occasionally more in some of the battles. The high mountains of Stajerska meant German soldiers, high snow, and bitter cold. Battles lasted all day and night and moved from mountain to mountain. Those killed, both partisans and Germans, were left in the snow. The partisans ran out of ammunition, had no proper places to care for their wounded, and were out of food. The German attack came to an end on February 26, 1944, with the German officers celebrating their victory and the "end" of the partisan unit in the castle of Vurberg (an Anglo-American bombing raid destroyed this castle in 1945). But the division was still alive. There remained only 440 effective fighters, with about 200 wounded in houses in the mountains or in make-shift hospitals in the snow. About 500 of the partisans remained in the snow forever. After the German offensive, an Anglo-American flight dropped submachine guns, uniforms, and munitions to the partisans.



WOUNDED BEING CARRIED, FEBRUARY 19, 1944.
ON THE LEFT IS CATHOLIC CLERGYMAN JOZE LAMPRET,
OFFICER RESPONSIBLE FOR RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS WITH THE DIVISION.