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2nd SS Panzer "Das Reich" Division (Casemate Illustrated)



Synopsis

The Das Reich Division was the most infamous units of the Waffen-SS. Hitler's Schutzstaffel (SS) units were originally paramilitary formations raised to protect the members of the Nazi party, and the Waffen-SS (the armed SS) was founded in 1934 as the SS-Verfügungstruppe. In 1939 the SS-Verfügungstruppe was placed under the operational command of the OKH. During the invasion of Poland the unit fought as a mobile infantry regiment. There were doubts about the unit's effectiveness, but Hitler ordered it be allowed to expand and form its own divisions, but under the command of the army. In 1940 the SS-Verfügungstruppe participated in the invasion of the Netherlands and France. After the Battle of France the SS-VT was officially renamed the Waffen-SS, and in 1941, the Verfügungstruppe was renamed Reich, later Das Reich. In 1941 Das Reich took part in the invasion of Yugoslavia, where its men accepted the surrender of Belgrade. In Barbarossa, Das Reich fought with Army Group Center, in the spearhead of Operation Typhoon and taking part in the battle of Moscow, by which time it had lost 60 percent of its combat strength. It was pulled off the front in mid-1942 and sent to refit as a panzer-grenadier division. Returning to the Eastern Front, Das Reich took part in the fighting around Kharkov and Kursk. Late in the year it was designated a panzer division. In 1944, the unit was stationed in southern France when the Allies landed in Normandy. The following days saw the division commit atrocities, hanging 100 local men in the town of Tulle in reprisal for German losses, and massacring 642 French civilians in Oradour-sur-Glane, allegedly in retaliation for partisan activity in the area. Later in the Normandy fighting, Das Reich was encircled in the Roncey pocket by US 2nd Armored Division, losing most of their armored equipment. Das Reich surrendered in May 1945.

Book Information

Series: Casemate Illustrated (Book 2)

Paperback: 192 pages

Publisher: Casemate (November 24, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 161200525X

ISBN-13: 978-1612005256

Product Dimensions: 7 x 0.6 x 10 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

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