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Combat Motivation and the Roots of Fanaticism The 12th SS Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* in Normandy

Michael E. Sullivan

War veterans generally retain a grudging respect towards their old enemy. Statements like, "I hold no ill will against them," or "They were only doing their jobs" are commonplace. However, no one makes these statements about the 12th SS Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend*. More often than not, the sentiment of Allied veterans towards the 12th SS is one of revulsion and hate. Even the Germans thought they were a particularly nasty bunch. Raised in 1943 from selected members of the Hitler Youth who were born in 1926, the rank and file of the 12th SS had been the first children to 'volunteer' for compulsory service in the Hitler Youth on his birthday in 1936. In the aftermath of Stalingrad this privileged cadre of 17 and 18 year-old Nazis was then targeted for a special division to be led by battle-hardened veterans of the 1st SS Panzer Division *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* (LAH). During the Normandy campaign of 1944 the 12th SS gained an unenviable reputation for brutality and fanaticism, much of that directed at the Canadians who fought them first and met them repeatedly throughout that summer. What follows here is an attempt to explain why the 12th SS was so very different from the other Axis divisions, even other SS ones, that the Allies faced in Europe.

Simply put, the main reason for the unique (and abominable) actions of the 12th SS lay in their combat motivation. The motivating factors of any soldier are numerous, complex, and never static. Anthony Kellett was the first to really focus on the holistic and situational nature of combat motivation, which he defined as:

the conscious or unconscious calculation by the combat soldier of the material and spiritual benefits and costs likely to be attached to various courses of action arising from his assigned combat tasks. Hence motivation comprises the influences that bear on a soldier's choice of, degree of commitment to, and persistence in effecting, a certain course of action.¹

The task in this case is to try to determine what influences bore on the 12th SS soldier's "choice of, degree of commitment to, and persistence in effecting" their course of action, both on and off the battlefield.

The 12th SS in Action

There is no doubt that the actions of the 12th SS were viewed as unacceptable by their opponents. An investigation by the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) Court of Inquiry determined that "the conduct of the 12th SS Panzer Division (Hitler-Jugend) presented a consistent pattern of brutality and ruthlessness." Significantly, this view was also shared by the 12th SS's German comrades. The SHAEF report stated that the 12th SS gained for itself "a most unsavory reputation, even among the rest of the German Armed Forces, [which] is evident from the fact that German prisoners taken, admit that it was called the 'Murder Division.'"² A member of the Polish Army also recorded that the 12th SS had a general reputation among the German troops as being reckless and murders.³ Grenadier George Mertens, a member of the 26th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, one of the two infantry regiments of the 12th SS, claimed that he did



Soldiers from the 12th SS Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* photographed during the early stages of the Normandy campaign. Atrocities committed by men from this unit led to it being referred to as “the murder division.”

not know that they had a bad reputation until he heard it in a prison camp. His reaction was “I could hardly believe it.” In retrospect, though, he believed that the label was deserved, and he also admitted that he heard the term “Murder Division” in his company.⁴

There is no doubt that the label of “Murder Division” was entirely justified. Howard Margolian documented the murder of 156 Canadian prisoners of war at the hands of the 12th SS during the Normandy campaign.⁵ In one instance, soldiers of the 12th SS shot at a group of 40 Canadian prisoners in a field near the Caen-Fontenay road on 8 June 1944, killing 35.⁶ In another case, after shooting eight unarmed Canadian prisoners in Authie on 7 June 1944, soldiers from the 12th SS pulled their bodies onto the road and ran over the corpses with tanks.⁷ Even simply being captured by the Hitler Youth was a deeply disturbing experience. Major J.D. Learmont of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders described them as “wildly excited and erratic.”⁸ He noted that they “shouted and screamed and behaved in an exceedingly disorderly manner. Their actions were such as

might possibly be attributed to drugs.”⁹ Another member of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders who survived capture by the 12th SS stated:

They behaved like maniacs, firing their weapons indiscriminately and acted as if they had been doped, their faces were flushed and they danced and jumped around in a very amazing manner. I was with a group of about 10 men, some being of my platoon and others from “A” company and we were literally chased across a field, the Germans firing the sub machine guns at our heels and shouting and acting like Indians.¹⁰

If their actions were not disturbing enough, it seemed that the soldiers who were a part of these atrocities were *proud* of their “accomplishments.” For example, *Untersturmführer* Karl-Walter Becker, a member of the reconnaissance battalion attached to the 12th SS said:

I asked [*Obersturmführer*] Palm who had committed this act [of shooting POWs] and was told that it had been *Oberscharführer* Stun and men of the M/C DR section. Stun had been particularly eager to distinguish himself by committing this atrocity.¹¹

Other members of the *Wehrmacht* also noted this arrogance among the 12th SS. A member of the 271st Infantry Division stated that he ran into members of the 12th SS who informed him that they had shot five or six Canadian POWs, and that the “Canadians had apparently asked the Nazis not to shoot, but as Preining’s informant jocularly remarked ‘a machine pistol fired by accident.’”¹²

There have been recent attempts made by revisionist historians, most notably Karl H. Theile, to place the actions of the 12th SS in a different light. Theile describes the actions of the 12th SS as retaliation for actions of Canadian soldiers on 25 June 1944 at Fontenay, although no specific examples of Canadian atrocities were given. Theile also claimed that many of the alleged occurrences were “twisted, exaggerated or simply made-up tales.” This, of course, goes against every shred of evidence that can be uncovered. Theile’s error is even more glaring when it becomes evident that most of the atrocities of the 12th SS occurred in the first two weeks of the invasion, well before the date given for the alleged Canadian atrocities.¹³

The 12th SS did not receive their reputation for being fanatical solely because of their actions against their prisoners. Rather, they gained the label of fanatical also as a result of their actions during battle. The soldiers of the 12th SS were informed by their officers that they were “not to give themselves up and must commit suicide if there is no other choice left.”¹⁴ This order was one of the so-called secret orders given to the 12th SS weeks before the invasion began. The authenticity of these orders has been disputed, but there is considerable evidence that orders similar to these were given. What is clear is that the soldiers of the 12th SS internalized this notion, along with the years of ideological indoctrination that they were subject to, and transferred these beliefs onto the battlefield. *SS-Brigadeführer* Kurt Meyer, who eventually became commander of the 12th SS, and who was later convicted by a Canadian court of war crimes, once described a fanatic that he had observed in Russia:

Bitter fighting is going on, especially on the right of the road. Here a young, spirited commissar is spurring his unit on again and again. It is not only his yelling which fires his men, but also his

Two soldiers from 12th SS captured by the Canadians during the fighting for Buron, 7 July 1944. Though their war is finished, these wounded soldiers remain defiant as they glare at the camera while marching in step to the prisoner of war cage.



Photo by Ken Bell, NAC PA 129130

bold example which keeps them coming on. I shall never forget the last picture of this man pulled up to his full height, throwing his last grenades at Mahl's section. Even so he solemnly drops the last one to the ground in front of him and covers it with his body. A quick lift and a shudder of the body, a fall of the shattered corpse, that is the end of a fanatic.¹⁵

Meyer's description is surprisingly similar to the actions of the boys who fought under his command in Normandy. During the battles around Falaise, Meyer noted that they "all know that the battle can only end with death or capture, but nobody is ready to stop fighting."¹⁶ Many of the soldiers would not accept capture as an alternative to death or dishonour. When *Untersturmführer* Reinhold Fuss and a few members of his platoon found themselves trapped in a church cemetery by the Canadians they "prepared for defence to the last." However, the Canadians just left them alone, since nobody wanted to risk their lives trying to capture a few fanatical teenagers who would, in all likelihood, not surrender without a fight. This proved to be a shrewd decision, because the SS soldiers had no intentions of surrendering. The Germans took turns working at digging a hole through a stone wall with a bayonet. After six days, without food and water, they had dug a hole big enough to escape, which they did during the night.¹⁷

Where escape was not an option for the 12th SS, death was usually the end. For example, SS-*Mann* Alfred Matthei, a member of the 2nd Engineer Training Battalion, noted that when he was taken prisoner by the Canadians, most of his comrades "declared they would fight to the last man."¹⁸ The War Diary of 1st Battalion of The Canadian Scottish Regiment recorded an incident during the fighting for Point 168 on 15 August 1944 when one young grenadier committed suicide instead of being captured.¹⁹ Perhaps the most disturbing example of this type of attitude by the 12th SS occurred during the final battles around Falaise, when a group of 50 to 60 Grenadiers were forced behind the walls of a school. A systematic Canadian attack on the school began after weaker attempts had failed. None of the 12th SS soldiers wanted to leave to report their situation, even though they all knew that remaining in their position meant death or capture. So the group drew lots to see who would be unlucky enough to carry the message and live. Eventually, the stronghold was eliminated, and there were only four prisoners left to be taken by the Canadians. Meyer called it "an outstanding example of the gallantry and willingness to sacrifice themselves."²⁰ It is more properly seen as the act of teenagers who were systematically moulded into fanatical fighters by years of indoctrination by the Nazi leadership.

Dejected soldiers from the 12th SS captured by 3rd Canadian Infantry Division in Normandy stand behind barbed wire. Their camouflage uniforms which distinguished them from other German forces are clearly visible.



Photo by Ken Bell, NAC PA 131397

For the officers and men of the 12th SS, there was a certain kind of romance to be found in the battlefield. The interrogators of Kurt Meyer noted:

To [Meyer] the battle of Caen-Falaise was magnificent in the best Wagnerian tradition. As he described his actions and those of his men, it seemed as though he liked to consider himself as Siegfried leading his warriors to their death. When he described how he came out of the Falaise Gap with sixty men, it is likely that the familiar strains of the "Twilight of the Gods" were echoing in his ears.²¹

Even so, romantic notions of Wagnerian death in battle do not explain the positively brutal fighting espoused by the members of the 12th SS. One report stated:

Later in the evening, the outstanding 46th Royal Marine Commando attacked the hand-picked boys of the *Hitlerjugend*. "They fought like lions on both sides. The dead were lying body to body," wrote the historians of the Chaudières [Regiment] who reached the village the next morning. "We searched every house, every yard, to prevent ambushes. That is the confirmation of how brutal the fighting of last night must have been. The commandos were lying dead in rows next to the dead SS-men. Hand grenades were scattered everywhere in the streets and front doors of the houses. At one spot we saw a commando and an SS-man who died virtually arm-in-arm, one killing the other. At another spot we found a German and a Canadian tank, having crushed each other. They were still smoking and from each of the smoke-blackened turrets hung the dead bodies of the machine gunners. Over there was a squad which had run toward a small wall to seek cover. They had been shot down before they reached it. And then, at the church, as the vanguard of "C" Company and the Carettes swung around the corner, they encountered three Germans. Only three. But one of them immediately drew his pistol and hit one of our men. A machine gunner killed two of the three SS-men, but the survivor did not surrender. He tricked us and disappeared. Now you will understand what fanatics we were fighting."²²

Kurt Meyer even stated that he knew of at least *three* separate cases between 9 June 1944 and 7 July 1944 when one of his men tied explosives to his body and jumped onto an Allied tank to destroy it.²³ No man, let alone a teenage boy, will do that instinctively unless he has been instructed and indoctrinated into a fanatical style of fighting.

The Origins of Fanaticism

The origins of such a fanatical combat motivation are complex, but Margolian is correct in bringing attention to the role that the 1st SS officers had on the development of the 12th SS as a fighting force. The link between competent officers and motivated soldiers is reflected throughout the historical and social scientific literature. In the sociological examination of this particular relationship, Dean Havron and Joseph McGrath determined that leader intelligence, knowledge and implementation of job skills, and a sense of the feelings of their men by the officer are key to the performance and motivation of a unit. The higher these factors are present in a leader, the more likely the unit will be highly motivated and effective.²⁴ Kellett determined that a soldier will obey and follow a leader if they meet their expectations, which many generally do. The more they meet these expectations, the more motivated the soldiers are in following them into battle. He also found that the most effective form of leadership is through example. Following a leader is easier for the soldier than fulfilling orders while their officers watch them from a distance.

Finally, Kellett concluded that an important way for soldiers to increase their combat motivation was through modelling oneself after a successful leader. Kellett also asserted that the effectiveness of the *Wehrmacht* was a result of the presence of these qualities within the leadership of the German Army during the Second World War.²⁵ These exact qualities were quite evident, and purposely strived for, by the officers of the 12th SS. Accordingly, if the officer of a unit embodied the characteristics of an excellent soldier, their example would definitely reflect upon the combat motivation of their unit. John Keegan identified the presence of the "Big Man" as one of the vital elements in the combat motivation of a soldier. The presence in a unit of a soldier who appears to be the embodiment of the perceived ideal soldier, the one who "brings combat alive" through his actions on the field, will positively affect the motivation of a soldier.

Another key element of Keegan's theory of combat motivation was that of mimicry, which can be defined as the efforts of a soldier in an attempt to emulate the actions of the "Big Man."

For the soldiers of the 12th SS, the “Big Man” of their unit was their officer, and there was a consistent effort on the part of the average soldier to imitate their leaders within every aspect of training and combat.²⁶ The bitter fighting in the Russian campaign that the soldiers in the 1st SS (LAH) experienced would have definitely influenced the way that the officers of the 12th SS led their men. This highly developed brutal ethos of fighting was transferred to the formative minds of the teenagers they led to battle, youth whose years of ideological indoctrination was immediately validated by the words and the actions of their officers. For these boys, being led by the heroes and former members of “Hitler’s Fire Brigade” would be akin to a midget hockey player playing on a line with Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux.

Along with the sense of pride that came with fighting alongside their heroes, whom they did not want to disappoint, came the added motivator of being a part of the SS. Blackburn noted that “the creation of the cult of the Nazi SS elite was a result of Hitler’s effort to “minister” to the psychic ills of his more fanatical followers. Unable to face the postwar world without direction, Heinrich Himmler and his wayward brawlers, searching desperately for some truth, followed a leader who would make everything come out alright.”²⁷ This dependence on Hitler for their identity meant that the most radical aspects of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* (world view) were internalized by the men of the SS. Realizing the potential that this group would have in the acquisition, consolidation, and maintenance of power, the National Socialist leadership strove to harness their energy and mindless devotion.

SS education consisted of moulding the mentality of the man. The basic attitude strived for was that the SS man should be a fighter for fighting’s sake, which was known as “heroic realism.” The soldier had to obey unquestioningly, had to be hard and impervious to all human emotions, be contemptuous of “inferior beings,” show comradeship and camaraderie, and believe that the word “impossible” did not exist. However, the spirit of combat efficiency was the real governing principle in the SS. The “hardness” trait of the SS man was key, and it was viewed on two levels. On the ideological level, the concept of hardness

evolved from National Socialist concepts of inhumanity, mercilessness, and savagery. On the military level, the fighting nature of the SS demanded that its men should have no hesitation in shedding either his own blood or the blood of foreigners.²⁸ As a result of their education, the SS soldier would have internalized the fact that their life belonged to “the German kingdom,” available for use in any way to protect the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*.²⁹ The SS man would have also known that he was indeed a part of an elite organization at the apex of German society,³⁰ a feeling that would have translated itself into the motivation on the battlefield.

Elite Status and Symbols

Since the Hitler Youth, through the years of resocialization and ideological indoctrination, embodied the qualities that the SS wanted, the SS were quite eager to recruit the Hitler Youth into their ranks and transmit their own radicalized values to their new recruits. Although at first the German army officials would not permit active recruitment of the Hitler Youth by the SS, by 1934 they allowed volunteers in reserve units to go with the SS (still a small Nazi party Praetorian guard) if there were no pressing army needs. This essentially gave Himmler all the justification that he needed to form a strong bond with the Hitler Youth in order to siphon off its members to the ranks of his private army. He instructed his SS leaders to initiate and preserve good relations with Hitler Youth leaders, and systematic Hitler Youth recruitment was discussed as early as 1935. A feeling emerged that the SS would be the preferred destination for the best of the Hitler Youth graduates, a sort of transfer from one elite Party formation to the other. The stringent conditions imposed on joining the SS created “an aura of preferment” that made it easy to attract and foster loyalty and dedication by those who were lucky enough to be accepted.³¹ When the SS began recruitment for the 12th SS, the standards were so high that it was certain that only the elite members of the Hitler Youth who were eligible would be accepted.

The elite status of the 12th SS in the German military was constantly stressed to its men. In his speech to future members of the division at their graduation from the *Wehrertüch-*

tigungslager der Hitler-Jugend (Hitler Youth Military Instruction Camps - WEL [see below]) in 1943, Artur Axmann stated:

You are the elite of German youth....In your unit, my comrades, the soldierly tradition of the Hitler Youth will find its ultimate expression. That is the reason why all German youths direct their attention to this unit, to you; that is why the honour of German youth depends on you.

Axmann was followed by Himmler, who echoed this sentiment:

In these weeks, when the sacrifice of Stalingrad was on everyone's mind, when the Russians mounted massive attacks, your Youth Leader made the decision to offer to the Führer the best young boys of the new class for a new Waffen SS division. The Führer agreed happily....After a few months in SS barracks you will enter a great formation....You will then train some more, lose many drops of sweat in order to save drops of blood and finally will march alongside its sister division, the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler. You will carry the name that the Führer gave you: SS Panzer Grenadier Division "Hitler-Jugend."³²

These were explicit appeals to the boys' idealism and further emphasis of their eliteness. In the process, they would have also increased the desire for the boys to get out into the battlefield and live up to their elite status, thereby positively enhancing their combat motivation.

The symbolic elements surrounding the naming and the symbols of the division contributed to the combat motivation of the 12th SS. Along with the 1st SS, the 12th SS was a part of the I SS Panzer Corps, a formation that was already serving on

These two photos show Hitler Youth Rallies in Germany before the war.





Photo by Michael M. Dean, NAC PA 161965

A dead SS trooper lies in the street in Falaise, 17-18 August 1944. The soldiers of the I SS Panzer Corps were the only Germans allowed to wear the words "Adolf Hitler" (visible just above the cuff) on their sleeves.

the Russian front but whose title was re-assigned to this new formation in Normandy to signify an even greater sense of eliteness.³³ Both the 1st SS and the 12th SS were the only formations to carry Hitler's name in their divisional title, an honour that they subsequently wore on their arms. Added to the symbolic similarities of the two divisions were their emblems. The crest of the 12th SS was that of the 1st SS with a rune intersecting the skeleton key at the centre of the crest. According to Hubert Meyer, through these symbols the 12th SS was able to achieve a greater cohesiveness, both within the division and within the I SS Panzer Corps, and confirmed for the Hitler Youth that they were "equal to their comrades of the Leibstandarte,"³⁴ thereby creating another powerful motivator.

The uniform worn by the soldiers of the 12th SS was also designed to motivate. Each member had at least a partial camouflage uniform, a relative luxury which made it hard to spot a 12th SS soldier in the field, but also made them distinctive in a crowd.³⁵ Both the officers and the recruits wore the same outfit, and this

combined with the relative youthfulness of the officer corp meant that it was virtually impossible to tell the enlisted men from the officers.³⁶ Apart from giving the soldiers an advantage over their German comrades who did not possess the camouflaged uniforms, the boys in the 12th SS would have felt a sense of pride that they were alike in appearance with their heroes, thereby increasing their combat motivation.³⁷

The combat motivation of the division was further enhanced by an elevated sense of unit esprit. This often comes about as a result of unit history and tradition,³⁸ and the 12th SS used their common experiences in the Hitler Youth and in the WELs and the influence of their SS officers to quickly come together and develop a unit bond that was defined by the fanaticism that each soldier felt towards Hitler and Nazi Germany. Kurt Meyer testified that "for their fighting motto the soldiers were given the idealistic point of view of soldierhood, in brief; 'I am nothing, we are everything.' The entire troops were looked upon as one unit."³⁹ The

soldiers recognized that the morale in their unit was high, and they truly believed themselves to be excellent soldiers, even superior to their own German counterparts.⁴⁰

Training & the Hitler Youth

A unique aspect of the division that would give its soldiers an even greater combat motivation was its training. The first element was emphasis on physical fitness. Even before entering the 12th SS, the teenage recruits had already undergone extensive physical training. Professional youth leaders and educators in the Third Reich placed physical fitness above intellectual training in their educational curriculum.⁴¹ Physical education was seen as a fundamental and inseparable part of National Socialist education, as long as it was done under the direction of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*.⁴² As a result, physical education classes began to take over the school's schedule. The normal timetable allocation for gym classes went from two to three in 1936, and from three to five in 1938.⁴³ Eventually, the Hitler Youth took over the planning of sports and sporting events, and the sports eventually took a militaristic tone. One of the favourite sports was rifle marksmanship, and by 1938 the Hitler Youth had over 1,250,000 participants in marksmanship.⁴⁴ Even within the division, a sporting program was set up, under the guidance of the Nazi Guidance Officer (NSFO - see below).⁴⁵ The result of all of this emphasis on sport was a group of teenagers who were physically fit and able to handle the strain of military life, thereby producing a more content and motivated soldier.

Another unique element in the training of the 12th SS was the universal paramilitary training for Hitler Youth boys between the ages of 16 and 18. Starting in early 1942, these boys entered the WELs which "proved to be a successful innovation in terms of meeting what the Nazis felt to be necessary psychological conditioning for military combat. In a way, they were ideologically charged basic training camps, less pragmatic, technical, and brutal than such camps for older draftees usually are, but more effective in fostering the attitudes that make military service more than a tolerable endurance test."⁴⁶ Camp directors were primarily wounded army officers and Waffen-SS veterans, and

trainers were army and Waffen-SS NCOs with either reserve status or temporary domestic assignments. The first WEL training cycle began on 10 May 1942, and by the end of 1943 nearly every boy of seventeen had undergone paramilitary training. The SS took over full control of many of the camps from the army, and thereby had ample opportunity to recruit from these camps into the Waffen-SS.⁴⁷

The quality and diversity of the WEL training also served to further motivate the average boy who passed through its gates. As Rempel pointed out:

The curriculum of the WELs incorporated an exaggerated Darwinian ideology infused with the youthful élan of the HJ, physical exercises highlighting its combative ethos, and the basic techniques of war making....[The] emphasis on orderliness helped to instill a sense of discipline, unquestioning obedience, and clear subordination. "Troop-like drills" were avoided, not only because they were inappropriate for young boys, but also because they were less practical than exercises designed to instill martial attitudes....[E]ndurance and toughness were the primary goals.⁴⁸

The military aspects of the WEL training were quite elaborate. Nearly half of the instruction time allotted was spent on terrain exercises, such as night training, patrolling, and terrain games. Use and care of small calibre weapons took up one quarter of the training time, and because of the successful nature of this training in the WEL, the army shortened its weapons training component in their basic training. Finally, physical exercise, first aid training, and general housekeeping, coupled with the ideological training, rounded out the schedule.

Ideological Preparation

It must be remembered that first and foremost, the WELs were military in nature, but the importance in examining and understanding the scope of the ideological aspects of these camps is key to understanding the later actions of the boys of the 12th SS. Ideology, as it was presented in the WELs, was styled to strengthen basic Nazi precepts. A uniform lecture prepared in Berlin and distributed to the WEL camps was given to the boys each week, and events like lectures, elaborate patriotic ceremonies, a nightly "political hour" (where trainees were asked

questions about the current political situations and their relation to National Socialist ideology), and discussions all were designed to have the maximum psychological impact. Among the weekly mottos were “We Fight,” “We Sacrifice,” and “We Triumph,” and the various lectures were all geared around the week’s motto. Although formal indoctrination only took up 14 hours out of a total training schedule of 166, ideology “permeated the entire curriculum whether it was implemented in the barracks, on the shooting range, exercise area, or the field.”⁴⁹ Through their involvement in the WEL, coupled with the education received at the hands of the Nazified educational system and within the structure of the Hitler Youth, many of the youth proved to be high-quality recruits,⁵⁰ thereby adding to their already inflated sense of elitence.

The ideological training did not stop with the soldiers’ transfer to the battlefield. Indeed, considerable emphasis was placed on enhancing combat motivation through intense ideological training. The officer with the most profound and direct impact on the ideological indoctrination of the 12th SS was the Abt. VI of the Divisional General Staff, the *Nationalsozialistischer Führungsoffizier* (NSFO - Nazi Guidance Officer). The NSFO evolved from the crisis of motivation that occurred in the Eastern Front. It was the responsibility of the NSFO and his staff, under the mandate of “troop care” (*Truppenbetreuung*), to distribute ideological materials to the troops. On 16 December 1943 *Brigadeführer* Fritz Witt, the first commander of the 12th SS, issued an order concerning the relationship that the NSFO was to have in the division, and the role that each officer was to play in the ideological indoctrination of the troops. Witt wrote:

On orders of 24.2.43 from the Reichsführer SS [Himmler] concerning the ideological orientation of troops, I order:

1. The leaders of the units are responsible for the ideological education of the officers, NCO’s, and soldiers in their units.
2. The co-workers of the Abt. VI will advise and support the commander about the implementation of the ideological education, will inform the unit officers and supply the necessary prepared educational materials, will give suggestions for the exhaustion of all possibilities of ideological education,...will organize and oversee the care of troops (*Truppenbetreuung*) in conjunction with the Abt. VI of the division.⁵¹

Each unit had two classes each week specifically for ideological training. At the end of each week, the unit officer was required to submit reports concerning the conduct of the ideological training. Each unit officer was also provided with a list of daily political questions which they were to use in instructing their troops. The officers under the Abt. VI were to aid the unit officer by providing them with the proper instructional material. Witt also appealed to the officers to participate regularly in the ideological indoctrination of the troops. They were ordered to attend monthly meetings with Witt for instruction in indoctrination, and each unit commander was ordered to conduct formal ideological training for two hours each week and to conduct discussions for one hour each week. Each Sunday they were also to conduct an informal “community” time where ideological questions were to be discussed. Finally, Witt urged each officer to talk about day-to-day ideological matters that arose at every possible occasion. The purpose behind this indoctrination was to make every man within the division “a convinced carrier” of the National Socialist ideology, and to transform the Hitler Youth into an SS man “who lives according to the fundamentals of the SS as a fanatic warrior.”⁵²

It was constantly stressed to the 12th SS officers that, like the WELs, ideology must permeate in all aspects of day-to-day life in the division. The progress of the ideological indoctrination was constantly monitored by the NSFO. For example, within three days of an ideological event being staged (like a film, a lecture or a theatre production) for a particular unit, the unit leader had to submit a “morale report” to the Abt. VI outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the event. Aside from the usual questions (which unit attended, what kind of event was it), the officer had to indicate how the troops received the event (either positively or negatively) and if there were suggestions for further events.⁵³

Preparing the Division for Battle

Another factor that set the 12th SS apart from their comrades was the scope, and the sometimes unorthodox nature, of their training once they were assembled in Beverloo. As Kurt Meyer stated, “training was made to approximate



Photo by H.G. Aikman, NAC PA 132860



Photo by M.M. Dean, NAC PA 167

12th SS troopers captured in Normandy.

war conditions. All exercises were conducted with live ammunition and with fighting weapons, not training weapons. The losses which thereby resulted had to be taken in order to avoid losses during action."⁵⁴ The use of live fire during training was certainly risky and unorthodox, but this type of training made the soldiers focus on their job and, in turn, highly motivated the survivors of the training.⁵⁵ In order to achieve the goals of toughening the recruits mentally, building confidence, and enhancing knowledge of weapons and equipment, the officers sometimes resorted to curious measures. For instance, in order to familiarize the Panzer crews and officers with the machines they were to take into battle, *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Max Wünsche, the CO of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment, took the soldiers to the MAN tank production factory in Nuremberg and had them work between eight and 14 days in the assembly area.⁵⁶ In one exercise, the CO of one infantry battalion required his soldiers, fully equipped with weapons and supplies, to leap 30 feet into a deep sand pit to train recruits to never hesitate in combat. In another demonstration, one instructor, in an attempt to show that grenade splinters only travelled laterally and upwards, detonated the weapon atop his head on his helmet. Other exercises had the youth disassembling and rebuilding their weapons with their eyes bound or while in the dark.⁵⁷

The health of the soldiers was also emphasized, with the knowledge that healthy, well-fed soldiers would perform better in battle. In order to promote physical development in the still-growing boys, and mindful of the fact that active teenaged boys need an enormous amount of calories per day, the soldiers of the 12th SS received special rations, the outcome of an agreement between the German High Command and *SS-Obergruppenführer* Oswald Pohl, the Chief of the *SS Wirtschafts-und Verwaltungshauptamt* (Economic and Administrative Main Office). The weekly ration for each soldier consisted of 3.5 litres of fresh milk, 1,750 grams of bread, 200 grams of meat, 140 grams of lard, 120 grams of sugar, and 245 grams of other nutrients, which, according to Pohl, was more substantial than the rations allotted to workers in heavy industry.⁵⁸ Instead of the cigarette ration that most soldiers received, the soldiers of the 12th SS had to be content with a ration of hard candy until they turned 18.⁵⁹ Any relationship

with a woman was strictly prohibited until the boy turned 18, so the soldiers were forbidden to patronize the local brothels. The consumption of alcohol was also strictly forbidden.⁶⁰ In the few documents that remain concerning discipline in the 12th SS, the evidence points to strict discipline against those who broke these rules.⁶¹

Finally, the 12th SS also held certain advantages over other German units when it came to equipment. Although it is true that the 12th SS struggled in obtaining some supplies, such as gasoline, in other ways it received more than what was normally allocated to divisions.

According to Eric Lefèvre,⁶² a normal Panzer Division by 1944 had one Panzer regiment, two Panzer Grenadier regiments (one motorized, one a combination motorized and armoured), a reconnaissance battalion, an anti-tank battalion, an artillery regiment, an anti-aircraft battalion, an engineer battalion, and various other sub-units (like signals, medical, etc), for a total strength of 14,787 officers and men. To this the 12th SS added more men and equipment. The list included: an additional mortar battalion (*Werferabteilung*) of 24 Nebelwerfers and a battery of 280/320 artillery; an extra company of 22 Panzer IV tanks (giving it a total of 182 tanks rather than the normal 160); 1,000 more men in each of the division's two infantry regiments; seven more self-propelled anti-tank guns than a regular Panzer division in Normandy in 1944 and the eventual replacement of towed AT guns by self-propelled *Panzerjägers*; and finally the engineer battalion assigned to the 12th SS was motorized and armoured, a luxury that was uncommon in comparable units. As a result of all this, the 12th SS ended up with a total strength of 19,090 men, over 4,000 more soldiers than what would be expected.

The Result

The message the 12th SS was clear and sustained, and this had an influence on their morale and their motivation. The division received more men, more heavy weapons, better rations, and, according to Kurt Meyer, better training than any other division in Normandy.⁶³ The soldiers also had maintained a faith in their weapons,⁶⁴ consequently giving them enormous confidence going into battle. Given the previous

teachings that they were racially superior and given the martial aspect of German society and education, there is little doubt that most of the teenagers in the 12th SS would have a feeling of invincibility. The feelings of superiority, the esprit de corps, the superior training, and the overabundance of equipment that the 12th SS possessed all combined to enhance the combat motivation of the soldiers to a level unreachd by other units in the European war. For the fanatical soldier, these tangible motivators are necessary in order to implement the teachings that the ideological indoctrination had forced them to internalize. It is no wonder, then, that the soldiers had "laughter in their eyes" and a "faith in their strength and the will to fight" before their first battle⁶⁵ and why their inability to prevail on the battlefield led to fury spent on helpless prisoners.

The story of the 12th SS is indeed a tragic and cautionary tale. The world view to which these fanatics adhered was thoroughly imbued with the glorification of war, and this led to puzzling, radical, and abominable behaviour, like grinding the bodies of Canadian dead under the tracks of their vehicles. These, though, are not the only examples of collective deviant behaviour by the members of the 12th SS. For example, one soldier was very upset because his wound came from a piece of falling brick. Untersturmführer Gerhard Amler recalled that Hauptsturmführer Heydrich "cried on my shoulder...Not even a proper wound! How would it look, him standing there and having to admit that a chunk of brick had fallen on his head." However, later Heydrich could be happy because his arm was in a plaster cast, thereby being "properly wounded and would not have to be ashamed any longer."⁶⁶ Caught in a web of lies in a society that was built on them, these teenagers never received a reasonable opportunity to question what they were doing. What is most tragic is that these fanatical teenagers believed that what they were doing was *correct*. Even after the war, many believed that they had done nothing wrong.

The fanaticism of the 12th SS resulted in the virtual annihilation of the division by the end of the Normandy campaign: their wish for death or glory met largely by a squalid burial in an unmarked roadside grave. Although exact casualty rates are unknown, it is estimated that

only 30 per cent of the division escaped across the Seine in August 1944. For Canadians, the tragic legacy of these fanatical young soldiers lies in the cemeteries at Beny-sur-Mer and Bretteville-sur-Laize, and in the monuments to their brutality at the Abbey d'Ardenne and the Château d'Audrieu: mute testimony to both the cost of the war and the need for it in the first place.

Notes

1. Anthony Kellett, *Combat Motivation: The Behaviour of Soldiers in Battle* (Boston: Kluwer Nijhoff, 1982) p.6.
2. National Archives of Canada (NAC), Record Group 24, Vol.10427, *Supplementary Report of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force Court of Inquiry re Shooting of Allied Prisoners of War by 12 SS Panzer Division (Hitler-Jugend) in Normandy, France, 7-21 June, 1944*, pp.1, 4.
3. NAC RG24, Vol.12838, 67/Falaise/1, Recorded Evidence of Pte. Bogdan-Andricj Ziolk, Polish Army in England, 25 July 1945.
4. NAC RG24, Vol.10427, *Supplementary Report*, Exhibit 6, Testimony of Gren. George Mertens, pp.3-6. Another soldier in the same company as Mertens, Grenadier Bernhard Herholz, tried to convince his captors that there were *two* Hitler Youth Divisions. He claimed that he was not attached to the one that had the bad reputation, but to the other one. There was, of course, only one Hitler Youth Division. *Ibid.*, Exhibit 7, Testimony of Gren. Bernhard Herholz, pp.4-5.
5. There is a possibility that the actual number of Canadian prisoners killed was as high as 178. See Howard Margolian, *Conduct Unbecoming: The Story of the Murder of Canadian Prisoners of War in Normandy*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) p.123.
6. *Ibid.*, pp.90-4.
7. *Ibid.*, p.60. See also NAC RG24, Vol.12842, #364, Statement by Major J. D. Learmont, North Nova Scotia Highlanders; NAC RG24, Vol.12842, #351, Statement by Sgt C. B. Morris, North Nova Scotia Highlanders.
8. Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), 159.95.023 (D7), *Record of Proceedings (revised) of the Trial by Canadian Military Court of S. S. Brigadeführer Kurt Meyer held at Aurich, Germany, 10-28 December, 1945*, Vol.I, p.132.
9. NAC RG24, Vol.12842, #366, Statement by Major J. D. Learmont, North Nova Scotia Highlanders.
10. NAC RG24, Vol.12842, #353, Statement by Sgt C. B. Morris, North Nova Scotia Highlanders. Another soldier actually claimed that "a number of them were actually frothing at the mouth. See NAC RG24, Vol.12842, #180, Statement by Pte. J. M. MacDonald, North Nova Scotia Highlanders.
11. NAC RG24, Vol.10427, *Supplementary Report*, Exhibit 29A, Voluntary Declaration by Untersturmführer Karl-Walter Becker, 2 Coy, Recce Bn, 12th SS, p.3.
12. NAC RG24, Vol.10427, *Supplementary Report*, Exhibit 25, Report of the Interrogation of Schtz. Otto Preining, 271 Inf Div, p.1.

13. Karl H. Theile, *Beyond "Monsters" and "Clowns" - The Combat SS: De-Mythologizing Five Decades of German Elite Formations*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997) pp.402-6.
14. See DHH, 159.95.023 (D7), Vol.I, pp.42-3, 71, 83, 297; Vol.II, p.556; NAC RG24, Vol.10427, *Supplementary Report*, Exhibit 6, Testimony of George Mertens, p.8; NAC RG2, 18 Central Registry Files, Vol.209, W-41 (v.1), Petition by K. Meyer, 8 December 1950, pp.5-6.
15. Kurt Meyer, *Grenadiers*. trans. by Michael Mendé. (Winnipeg: J. J. Fedorowicz, 1994) p.76.
16. *Ibid.*, p.166.
17. See H. Meyer, p.57.
18. NAC RG24, Vol.10427, *Supplementary Report*, Exhibit 19, Declaration on Oath by SS-Mann Alfred Matthei, 2. Engineer Training Battalion, p.3.
19. NAC RG24, Vol.15038, War Diary, 1st Battalion The Canadian Scottish Regiment, Appendix 11.
20. H. Meyer, p.191.
21. NAC RG24, Vol.12840, 67/Kurt Meyer/(5), Evidence File, Special Interrogation Report, p.2.
22. Quoted in H. Meyer, pp.70-1.
23. NAC RG24, Vol.12840, 67/Kurt Meyer/(5), Evidence File, Special Interrogation Report, p.4.
24. See M. Dean Havron and Joseph E. McGrath. "The Contribution of the Leader to the Effectiveness of Small Military Groups." *Leadership and Interpersonal Behaviour*. ed. by L. Petrollo and B.M. Bass. (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1961). pp.169, 171.
25. Kellett, pp.152-5, 162, 307.
26. John Keegan, "Towards a Theory of Combat Motivation." *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West, 1939-1945*. ed. by Paul Addison and Angus Calder. (London: Pimlico, 1997) pp.8-10.
27. Gilmer W. Blackburn, *Education in the Third Reich; Race and History in Nazi Textbooks*. (New York: State University, 1985) p.10.
28. Hans Buchheim, "Command and Compliance." trans. by Richard Barry. In Helmut Krausnick et. al., *Anatomy of the SS State*. (London: Collins, 1968) pp.320-2, 329, 334.
29. Alfred Kotz, *Führen und Folgen*. (Potsdam: Ludwig Voggenreiter, 1934) p.41.
30. Michael Reynolds, *Steel Inferno: 1st SS Panzer Corps in Normandy*. (New York: Dell, 1997) p.6.
31. Gerhard Rempel, *Hitler's Children: The Hitler Youth and the SS*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989) pp.23-4, 46.
32. This name was later changed when the division was reformed to become a Panzer division. These two speeches were quoted in Luther, p.34.
33. This new formation was to take precedence over the old I SS Panzer Corps, commanded by SS-Obergruppenführer Paul Hausser, which was subsequently demoted to become the II SS Panzer Corps. See Reynolds, pp.13-4.
34. Hubert Meyer, *The History of the 12. SS-Panzerdivision Hitlerjugend*, 1994, p.11.
35. See Luther, pp.130-1, fn. 13.
36. Directorate of History and Heritage, 159.95.023 (D7), *Record of Proceedings*, Vol.1, p.99.
37. The soldiers of the 12th SS were masters in the art of camouflage, being taught by their instructors who had learned the craft in Russia. This knowledge was to prove deadly for the Allied forces who came in contact with 12th SS snipers who were virtually impossible to discover. See Luther, p.64.
38. See Kellett, pp.46-51.
39. DHH, 159.95.023 (D7), *Record of Proceedings*, Vol.II, Testimony of Kurt Meyer, p.553. See also NAC RG 2, 18 Central Registry Files, Vol.209, W-41 (v.1), Petition by Kurt Meyer, 8 December 1950, p.6.
40. See DHH, 159.95.023 (D7), *Record of Proceedings*, Vol.III, Exhibits, Exhibit T-4, Record of the evidence of Alfred Helzel, p.20; NAC RG 24, Vol.10427, *Supplementary Report*, Exhibit 7, Testimony of Gren. Bernhard Herholz, p.5.
41. Rempel, p.173.
42. "Physical Education and National Socialism," in George L. Mosse, *Nazi Culture*, 1966, p.281.
43. Incidentally, the second rise came at the expense of religious education. See Richard Grunberger, *A Social History of the Third Reich*, 1983, p.365.
44. Rempel, pp.178-81. See also H. W. Koch, *The Hitler Youth*, 1975, p.114.
45. National Archives and Record Administration (Washington) (NARA), Microcopy T-354, Roll 155, #3799087, Betr.: Sportabzeichenwesen; Neuorganisation der bisherigen Vorgänge beim Inspekteur für Leibesarziehungen, 24.3.1944.
46. Rempel, p.184.
47. *Ibid.*, p.185-8.
48. *Ibid.*, p.194.
49. *Ibid.*, pp.194-5.
50. *Ibid.*, pp.195, 203.
51. NARA, T-354/155/3799083-4, Dienstanweisung für die Mitarbeiter der Abteilung IV, 16.12.43.
52. Luther, p.71.
53. NARA, T-354/153/3797068, Betr.: Truppenbetreuung; Einreichung eines Stimmungsberichtes nach erfolgen Aufführungen von KdF-Bühnen, Filmveranstaltungen und Vortragsredern, 24.1.1944.
54. DHH, 159.95.023 (D7), *Record of Proceedings*, Vol.II, Testimony of Kurt Meyer, p.553. See also NAC RG 24, Vol.10427, *Supplementary Report*, Exhibit 8, Kurt Meyer, pp.16-7. The casualty training rate is unknown.
55. James Lucas, *Battle Group! German Kampfgruppe Action of World War Two*. (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1993) p.143. See also Luther, p.64.
56. H. Meyer, p.7.
57. Luther, p.65.
58. *Ibid.*, pp.62-3. See also NARA, T354/153/3797135-8, Sanitätsdienstliche Anordnuger Nr.1, 10.5.1944
59. K. Meyer, p.116.
60. Luther, p.62. See also NARA, T-354/153/3797121, Btl. Befehl 40/44, 1.5.1944.
61. See, for example, T-354/153/3796964-6, Straftenor, 27.4.1944.
62. Information on the Order of Battle for the 12th SS comes from H. Meyer, especially pp.358-9, and Luther, pp.248-53. The information for Panzer Regiment "44" comes from Eric Lefèvre, *Panzers in Normandy: Then and Now*. (London: Plaistow, 1983), especially pp.6-17. The information listed for the 1st SS is found in Reynolds, App.I-III.
63. See K. Meyer, p.116.
64. Reynolds, p.51.
65. K. Meyer, p.117.
66. *Ibid.*, pp.135-6.

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