

Achtung Panzer! - Heinz von Westernhagen!

Introduction - What's New - Site Map
Panzer Profiles - Additional Information
Vehicles of the Wehrmacht - Military Links
Bron Pancerna - Forum

Heinz von Westernhagen

Commander, 501st Heavy Tank Battalion, 1st SS Panzer Division LSSAH

Born: August 29, 1911, Riga, Latvia

Died: March 20, 1945, Veszprem, Hungary - by his own hand.

An Epitaph

By Wilhelm Kiesselbach

How does one capture the essence of a man long gone? How does one pay appropriate tribute to a man of honor, patriotism, incredible courage, integrity and commitment without writing an entire book? Heinz von Westernhagen's tragic story, as the story of many of his contemporaries deserves to be put into perspective.

Why write his epitaph now, why not a long, long time ago? The reason: A simple e-mail from an American military historian committing me to set the record straight. I want Heinz as well as his brother Rolf, their pain, the circumstances of sacrificed lives, their remarkable sense of loyalty and honor understood and respected.

Also contributing to my sense of urgency: The 1965 book, the "Children of the Perpetrators", written by his daughter Doerte, (who never knew him), in which she first meticulously researches his life and his career-for the single stated purpose of attempting to prove him to be a knowing, if not active participant in the horrors visited by the criminals of the Third Reich upon the Jews, Gypsies, Socialists and other innocents. She had absolutely no idea what kind of a man her father was. Maliciously misinterpreting his letters to his brother Harald, quoting a collection of psychiatrists and other self proclaimed experts, she is totally blind to the obvious. Where she should have been proud, she was ashamed; where she should have respected, she judged; where she should have understood, she purposely and insidiously misrepresented him and his end. She is vicious and with malice-fortunately the "Children of the Perpetrators" is out of print and not available anymore.

Her father never had the chance to speak for himself, I want to try and do it for him. Those of us, who are or have been soldiers, understand that bravery, loyalty and sense of duty transcend political borders.

Like so many Germans of their time, neither Heinz nor his younger brother Rolf ever had a chance. Fate, political developments in Europe, the times got in the way. Regardless of the path that was forced upon them, they were always honorable, they all did their best. To understand this, one has to know at least the rudimentary facts.

Heinz von Westernhagen began a turbulent and tragic life in Riga, Latvia in 1911 as the fourth son of a well to do dentist into a comfortable middle class family. Rolf was his younger brother. In the winter of 1914 -15 all Germans were ordered to leave Riga within 3 days or be deported to

Siberia. The von Westernhagen family, leaving everything behind, escaped through Finland and Sweden to Germany, hoping that one day, they could return to their home.

In 1917, immediately before the Russian revolution, the day finally arrived. The von Westernhagens returned to Riga hoping to be able to rebuild their lives. It was to be a very short dream: In 1918 after the end of World War I, as a part of the Versailles treaty, all of the Baltic provinces were returned to Russia. In January of 1919 the Bolsheviks occupied Riga and started a 5 months reign of terror: raping, pillaging and murdering thousands. In the course of the Russian civil war, Baltic militia and members of the German Free Corps liberated Riga in May of 1919. However, the von Westernhagens fearing a return of the dreaded Bolsheviks and, with 3000 others, left Riga for Germany in July of 1919. This time it was to be for good.

The following years were a desperate time of hunger, hopelessness and abject misery for millions of Germans. The diary of Heinz's father describes the years between 1919 and 1931 as time of incredible suffering for the entire family: No patients, no food, no money, no hope-continuing and endless desperation. In 1931 at the age of 15 my mother leaves. She found a job as a maid in Hamburg. Heinz finished high school and, in the absence of any opportunities, in 1927 at the age of 16 he joins the German merchant marine. After going to sea on and off for 6 years, he was beached in 1933, (from his time at sea exist a number of his published articles, amazing in their sensitivity and eloquence), found himself without a job, joined the NSDAP and the newly formed SA. During 1933 - 1934 he worked as a laborer in a rubber factory. He was converted to the SS in 1934 and assigned to a stand-by unit. Heinz was activated in 1935.

After a number of training courses, immediately and to his great dismay he was assigned to the "Sicherheitsdienst" (SD), apparently it was felt that his experience in foreign countries as a sailor predestined him. His responsibilities were to be in foreign counter intelligence-and he hated it. He wanted to be an officer with a combat unit-he was ashamed. Unlike many, many others who saw the intelligence service as a means to stay out of harm's way, Heinz was constantly plotting to get to the front. After some obstacles which included his de facto dismissal from the active SS and transfer to a reserve unit, he was aided by the violent opposition of his superiors who firmly believed that his training qualified him to be a combat leader of men, he ended with an active combat unit in 1940.

Thus began his career as a combat officer in the 1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, one of the Third Reich's elite combat units. (I am not going to expound on the often ignored and yet vital differences between the regular SS and the Waffen (armed) SS. Much has been written and said on that subject already. It is however important to note, that there are vast differences between the various Waffen-SS units in terms of deportment, morale, discipline and combat effectiveness.)

Heinz von Westernhagen:

1940: First SS Armored Division, LSSAH: Company Commander - Western Front, (Holland, Belgium, France)

1941: First SS Armored Division, LSSAH: O-1, 1st Battalion - Balkans, Greece

1941: First SS Armored Division, LSSAH: First Special Missions Staff Officer - Russia

1942/43: First SS Armored Division, LSSAH: Commander, Assault Gun Battery - Russia

His younger brother Rolf joins the Assault Gun Battery from an artillery unit in the Waffen SS Division "Das Reich".

Heinz receives a severe head wound during Operation Zitadelle in the Kursk

salient (July 1943). 8 months convalescent leave.

1944: First SS Armored Division, LSSAH: Battalion Commander, 101st Heavy Tank - Russia, Normandy - 6 months convalescent leave, (recurring complications of the head injury.)

His brother Rolf joins the 101st Heavy Tank

1944/1945: First SS Armored Division, LSSAH: Battalion Commander, 501st Heavy Tank - Ardennes, Hungary

His brother Rolf again serves under him in the 501st Tank as a tank platoon commander. The old head injury is troubling Heinz badly. His memory, appetite and the need to sleep are severely affected and, for all practical purpose, absent.

Day-by-day chronologies of the many battles are available in Mr. Agte's and Mr. Schneider's above mentioned books, as well as on a number of websites.

I am absolutely convinced that, in his heart, Heinz was much, much more a soldier than a National Socialist. His loyalty and commitment were first to his country and secondly to his comrades. On many occasions in the circle of friends he said that, "after this war is won, we have another one on our hands: against the Nazi party." In the 26 letters to his brother Harald he does not mention the party once. They demonstrate what really moved him: The terror and suffering of the war, the dying, his exhaustion, desperation and his determination. Most of all they express his hatred for and fear of the "Red Horde" from whom he must protect Germany. He had experienced what they were capable of and he, like most of the Germans were familiar with the stories of the atrocities committed by them all along the eastern front and towards the end of the war, against millions of German refugees. He once wrote: "When this is over, we are all going to collapse like empty potato sacks." I believe that, at this, the final stage his primary loyalty was to his men - considering the situation, there could not have been anything else. That and total physical and emotional exhaustion.

What happened at the end is telling and, in my opinion represents his final legacy: I had no idea until, about a year ago an American military historian e-mailed me and told me that Heinz had not been killed by a single, small, errand Russian bomb, as I, all of us, had been told all these years. According to him, Heinz had shot himself after having been relieved of his command. Although devastating information, it made sense. It also affected me deeply because it provides the final punctuation of futility to the life of a man who not only had given everything, but had been one of the best, most respected and heroic. Now, as a final consequence he clearly acknowledges that all had been for naught. Agte in his book "Michael Wittman and the Tiger Commanders of the Leibstandarte" perpetuates the bomb story. When I questioned him about that, he claimed he had never even heard of another version. Wolfgang Schneider on the other hand, in his book "Tigers in Combat II" clearly relates the truth: "March 20, 1945: "The battalion commander (worn down by illness) is relieved of his command. During the procedure of handing over his command there is an enemy air raid. According to the official statement, Obersturmbannführer von Westerhagen is killed by an aircraft bomb; but in fact he shoots himself with his own pistol. (He was 34 years old.) Sturmabführer Kling is appointed to be the new commander." - Reference: Schneider.

When I wrote Mr. Schneider, he quotes 2 witnesses who came forward by name, unfortunately they are both now dead. Nevertheless, I believe him.

While Agte has a very personal association with the Leibstandarte, Schneider was and is a historian with a focus on historical correctness.

It is my personal opinion that this lame "bomb" fable diminishes Heinz von

Westernhagen as a man and a soldier and that he deserves better!
"SS-Obersturmbannführer Heinz von Westernhagen received a surprise order to leave his Tiger battalion and join the officers' reserve. With a heavy heart he was forced to hand over his battalion. There was bitterness and disbelief in the battalion staff over this decision." - Reference: Agte. The background and circumstances of Heinz' relief from command have never been explained and, in my opinion, are highly questionable. Why? He was universally recognized as the superb combat commander of one of Germany's highest regarded medium sized heavy armor units and as an outstanding leader of men. (As a matter of fact, there is no question and it has been acknowledged that it was his leadership and his personality that made the 101st /501st into the formidable fighting unit it became.) Furthermore, tactically there could not have been a worse time, (the Russians were attacking mercilessly), to relieve a proven and beloved combat commander in the middle of an engagement. It makes absolutely no sense - unless Heinz's loyalty to his men went beyond the "required" loyalty to the "Thousand Year Reich".

It could well have been his debilitating head wound-it also could have been something else. Did he begin to doubt and object to the senseless dying of his men? In my opinion, it was not the bullet that killed him. It was his sense of honor and the commitment he had to his men who had followed him through years of hell. Having to leave them at this, the darkest hour must have been unbearable and unacceptable to this model soldier. His loyalty truly was his honor.

Whatever really happened, clearly, there were a number of very good reasons to hide the truth: Firstly, an attempt had to be made to keep it from his men already deeply shocked at losing their beloved leader who had been with them since the early days. Under the prevailing circumstances, the consequences if they found out could have been disastrous.

(Coincidentally, not long afterwards when the time for surrendering had come, Jochen Peiper spoke to them and specifically told them that suicide should not be an option "because the country still needed them.")

Secondly, it was considered to be defeatism at its worst and I am convinced that the people involved decided to spread the lie in order to protect Litty, his pregnant wife. Still, they could not even get the story straight. Rolf, his brother, told me that he always thought that the "bomb story" was a very flimsy fabrication, (he, as a matter of fact believes it to be entirely plausible that Heinz was shot by one of the fanatics who were still around and who objected to his point of view.) Furthermore, Heinz's son Heiner told me that he had never heard that version of his father's death. He had always been told that it had been a bullet (!!)

from a sniper. I am absolutely convinced that the version of his suicide is true. Beyond that, it makes sense: Heinz had given everything he had. He was finished, emotionally and physically. The debilitating head wound he had received while in command of the assault guns during Operation Zitadelle in Russia bothered him greatly. Rolf told me that in the final months of the war, Heinz regularly had to be flown to Berlin to the hospital for treatment. He could not sleep anymore and had absolutely no appetite-there was nothing left of him and yet...he kept driving himself, kept fighting a war which he must have known could not be won. Under these circumstances and considering his sense of duty, the consequences were inevitable.

Heinz von Westernhagen was a brave and decent man who deserves to be remembered with respect, love and understanding. In a different time and under different circumstances he would have been a hero. He is one of

mine!

Rolf von Westernhagen, his younger brother as a member of Heinz' various

commands took part in all of the campaigns. In 1945 after the failed Ardennes offensive, Rolf was sent to participate in an officer's course. He was not with the unit when Heinz met his end. He has told me that he would have never gone back, had he known. At the end Rolf and many of his comrades surrendered to the US Army who, despite assurances to the contrary, promptly turned him over to the Russians. (Being captured by the Russians was every German soldier's worst nightmare, beyond that, members of the Waffen SS were especially brutally treated. What made things worse, Rolf carried Heinz's last name. Vietnam veterans will be able to emphasize-we would have rather been killed than captured by the Viet Cong - the Russians, if anything were worse.) Rolf spent the next 11 years in Siberia as a Russian POW in pure unadulterated hell under unbelievable circumstances. He was finally released when the German Chancellor Dr. Konrad Adenauer personally went to Moscow in 1956 with a special petition for the release of the remaining German POWs.

In the final essence, Heinz and his brother Rolf were decent, honorable and brave men who went to fight in a brutal and terrible war, like so many others for centuries did before them, in so many other wars. They suffered and died and like so many before and after them, they were maligned when all was over. They deserve to be recognized for their personal bravery and their sacrifices for a cause which for them consisted of a personal vision, loyalty to their comrades and following orders.

A word about myself: My name is Wilhelm Kiesselbach, my mother was Heinz's sister. He used to come and visit and all of us loved and respected him. Even my father, who hated the Nazis and who was an officer in the German Army. My father was an attorney and a soldier in the first and second world wars and yet, he and his family wanted nothing to do with the National Socialists. My Grandfather, who was Chief Justice at the High Court in Hamburg was removed from office by Hitler for that reason. After the war, at the age of 85 he was recalled and installed as the President of the Court to help rebuild the judicial system in the English zone. I emigrated to the United States, was a member of the United States Armed Forces, volunteered for service in Vietnam and served my country with the same sense of dedication as did my uncles Heinz and Rolf. Yet, I cannot even begin to imagine what they endured-but I do have a very deep sense of appreciation and pride. I know exactly what kind of men they were. I have met others like them, in different uniforms. Outstanding warriors are a rarity. They and many of their comrades are among that distinguished group and I am proud to be related to them.