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Combat History of the 21st Panzer Division 1943-45, The

Werner Kortenhaus

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For years, one of the most essential sources for study of the Normandy invasion was known only to a select few and nearly unobtainable even to those who knew of its existence. It has never before been translated. None of the major English language histories of the Normandy Invasion refer to it, even though it is the history of the only German armored division that was in place in the Caen area at the moment of the invasion. It reveals key facts that are missing elsewhere. At long last, Werner Kortenhaus' history of the 21st Panzer Division has been published in English. Kortenhaus's account of the division's subsequent commitment, in the Lorraine - Saar Region - Alsace area provides intriguing detail on this little known sector as the southern wing of Patton's 3rd Army strove for the Upper Rhine area of Germany. The last section follows the division after its hasty transfer to the Oder Front, facing the final Russian onslaught on Berlin.

In revising and updating his account, originally released in two massive typed volumes, Die Schlalcht um Caen, 1944, Caumont, Falaise Seine, der Einsatz der 21. Panzer Division" in 1989 and "Lothringen Elsaß, der Ostfront, der Einsatz der 21. Panzer Division" in 1990, Werner Kortenhaus has exhaustively researched all available sources in German, French and English to supplement his own experiences and those of his fellows and the many individuals whom he interviewed. The result is a seamless account of the Normandy invasion in the British sector from the German viewpoint that sheds new light on many controversial issues. The account continues, following the division and surrounding events during the retreat to the Seine and the division's later commitment in Alsace - Lorraine and, finally, on the Oder Front against the Soviet Union, and its eventual demise in the horrors of the Halbe pocket.

The account is not restricted to the history of the 21st Panzer Division, but includes detailed analysis and exposition of actions of adjoining divisions and of the larger picture, from the German viewpoint.

Elements of the 21st Panzer Division were committed separately prior to the Normandy invasion on both sides of the River Orne, in the vicinity of Caen. Although the 21st Panzer Division was the only German armored division stationed in the Caen area, it stood by in frustration with engines running for hours awaiting orders for action. Even then it was handicapped by its prior dispersed commitment. Elements of the 21st Panzer Division fought against the British airborne force at Pegasus Bridge, while other elements launched a counterattack that almost reached Sword Beach. The division's Kampfgruppe von Luck was a major part of the German defense east of the Orne. North of Caen, to the west of the Orne, along with the 12th SS-Hitler Jugend Panzer Division the 21st Panzer Division blocked the unrelenting British frontal attacks on Caen that culminated in "Operation Charnwood. The division subsequently played a major role in halting the British assault east of Caen, "Operation Goodwood", short of its final objectives. The division was then shifted westward where remnants of the division then defended against Montgomery's "Operation Bluecoat" that resulted in the final British Breakthrough on their western flank as the Americans broke through to Avranche and beyond. As the German counterattack at Mortain failed and allied forces moved toward encircling the German Fifth Panzer Army and Seventh Army , the 21st Panzer Division was shifted again and attached to the I SS-Panzer Korps. Its two combat groups were separated by the advance of the II Canadian Corps, Kampfgruppe Rauch and elements of Panzer Aufklärungs Abteilung 21 ending up inside the Falaise Pocket, Kampfgruppe von Luck on the outside.

Following the retreat to the Seine, the reconstituted, but much depleted, 21st Panzer Division then fought in Lorraine against Patton's 3rd Army. As one of the few armored divisions not included in Hitler's build up of

forces for the impending Ardennes Offensive, the division became a "fire brigade", shifted from one hot spot to another, constantly counter attacking as the German front was forced back from Lorraine into the Saar region and then into Alsace.

Kortenhaus presents an unusual and detailed insight into the "poor man"s war" against the southern arm of Patton's thrust through the Saar region to the upper Rhine, as a few hard-pressed remnant formations tried to "hold the line" while the bulk of the remaining German forces were massed and reconstituted for Hitler's last great offensive in the Ardennes.

As the Ardennes operation failed, the 21st Panzer Division took part in "Operation Nordwind" and fought on in Alsace, until the Russian assault over the Vistula shattered the frail German Eastern Front. Within a matter of weeks the Russian forces reached the Oder and broke into East Prussia and Silesia. On 31 January 1945 Hitler ordered that the 21st Panzer Division be pulled out of Alsace and dispatched in extreme haste to the Eastern Front in the Küstrin area.

A mere shadow of even what it was when it entered the fighting in Lorraine, the division established contact with the garrison of "Fortress Küstrin" before it was, again, hastily shifted south into northern Silesia in the Sagan - Bunzlau area on the Lausitzer Neiße River. After initial eventful fighting the division fell back to the west bank of the Lausitzer Neiße River, where it dug in. As the Russian offensive focused on other sectors, the defensive line along the Lausitzer Neiße River was successfully held by the 4th Panzer Armee until mid-February 1945. / While the Russians concentrated forces for their last offensive, the "Battle of Berlin", the Oder Front remained relatively quiet, except on the boundary between the 4th Panzer Armee and 17th Armee, where the "Battle for Lauban" developed as the last major offensive of the German Army. A combat group and command staff from the 21st Panzer Division took part in the offensive, which, while successful, faded into insignificance in comparison with the magnitude of Russian forces.

Faced with the concentration of the Soviet forces for the final offensive on Berlin , the German Supreme Command repositioned forces, transferring the 21st Panzer Division to the Weißwasser - Spremberg area, on the left wing of the 4th Panzer Armee, of Heeresgruppe Mitte, initially as Armee reserve. The division was ordered to dig in in the "Mathilda" Position, in the German second line of defense. Marshal Koniev's 1st Ukrainian Front launched its final offensive as the last elements of the division arrived. The division was quickly drawn into the fighting. Fighting in desperate defense, the division fell back on Cottbus. The Russian breakthrough in the area between Spremberg and Cottbus split the German V Armee Korps , including the 21st Panzer Division, off from the left wing of the 4th Panzer Armee/Heeresgruppe Mitte , forcing it to the north, into the sector of Heeresgruppe Weichsel, where it was attached to the German 9th Armee.

The division met its end as the 9th Armee was cut off and destroyed in the Halbe Pocket, while Russian forces fought within the city of Berlin.

Helion's English edition includes a significant number of rare photographs and many maps. Werner Kortenhaus' study represents a significant contribution to English language material available regarding a Heer panzer division, besides its extensive coverage of German armoured operations in Normandy, Lorraine, Alsace and elsewhere.

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