

APRIL 13, 1999

A military lesson from the Germans

BY DON NEWLANDS

Why, just this evening a so-called military expert on CNN reinforced the popularly-held belief that the Serbs were a formidable opponent, saying "remember how they fought the Germans during World War II."

We hear the Americans routinely dismissing the thought of ground forces. Besides, they say, it would take two months to organize a 200,000-troop ground assault.

Consider this: Fifty-eight years ago, Germany's "Reich" Division learned that after an eight-day march from France to Temesvar, Romania, they would begin hostilities against both Greece and Yugoslavia.

On the morning of April 9, they were ordered to send armoured cars and motorcycle battle groups to find the best way across the Danube so they could strike Belgrade.

The Germans knew that the best way to destroy the will of the Yugoslavs was to capture their capital city. The commander, Sturmbannführer Heinz Hauser, stressed that every effort was to be made to take the city by a *coup de main*.

It was not an easy task. To reach Belgrade the bridges across the Danube had first to be captured, and an all-weather road to the capital had to be reached. But before that, the Reich Division had to traverse a roadless rain-sodden swamp.

At 09.05 hours on the 11th, the divisional attack began. Most of their heavy vehicles were held fast by the clinging mud. The motorcycle battalion forged ahead along its thrust-line, avoiding much of the swampy ground by hurtling along a railway embankment and dike wall.

An equally determined "Deutschland" Regiment had brought all its battalions to Alibunar and the SS Corps formations ensured that the road was now free and open. The day's operations had shattered the Yugoslav forces and they were determined not to give the enemy a chance to regroup.

The Reich Division was ordered to attack the retreating forces, but could not. The Grenadier regiments were exhausted by the strain of battle and the trek through the mud, often waist deep. The Corps was told to cancel its pursuit and those units that had reached the banks of the Danube were ordered to halt and rest.

This order, however, did not reach Hauptsturmführer Klingenberg, commanding No. 2 Company of the motorcycle battalion. He ferried 10 of his men across the Danube in a captured motor boat. By 16.30 hours he and his group began their drive towards and into the capital.

When the handsome young Klingenberg and his 10 soldiers arrived in Belgrade he set up two machine-gun posts.

At that moment an employee of the German embassy approached him and pleaded that the SS protect the building and the ambassadorial staff.

With information from the embassy staff, Klingenberg became aware of the unique opportunity he had to gain a decisive victory. He ordered the German military attaché to summon the mayor of Belgrade.

Klingenberg was introduced as the commander of a very large military formation. The Hauptsturmführer issued an ultimatum: Unless the city capitulated he would order the Luftwaffe to launch a bombing raid.

The bluff worked and by 18.45 the mayor had formally surrendered Belgrade to Klingenberg.

In the early hours of Sunday, April 13, Sturmbannführer Heinz Hauser's HQ was informed that a motorcycle patrol from the Reich Division had captured Belgrade.

Hauptsturmführer Klingenberg was awarded the Knight's Cross for his dramatic action and the surrender of Belgrade with only 10 men!

Don Newlands is a retired journalist, now living in Colborne.

FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME, A POSITIVE ARTICLE ABOUT THE SS