

We Knew Him and Knew His Deeds He lived and Died for Us

Waffen SS Standartenführer Max Hansen

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Interview with Knight's Cross Oakleaves recipient Max Hansen,
Standartenfuhrer and Regimental Commander of the elite 1st SS-Panzer
Division Leibstandarte SS-Adolf Hitler

Niebull, Germany, 1983.



What brought you to join the SS?

Max: I joined the LAH [Leibstandarte SS-Adolf Hitler] because I saw in this organization the elite of the German nation. The Reichsführer-SS Himmler had a dream of a united Germanic peoples working to rebuild genetic traits that were being lost to mixing of blood; Germany was tied to this blood line. I saw what the enemies and foreign influence were doing to Germany, I revolted against this. There were many men who revolted against this destruction; we revolted by joining Adolf Hitler. I was in the SA first, and then saw that the SS were more of the loyalists of the National Socialist movement. The SA was the military arm that fought the Red front, and many were still Red-leaning, or wanted a different direction than the Führer. This is why they were purged in 1934; many became a liability by preaching revolt. Many friends at the time felt the same way; the SS was for me the best place to go to see the dream of National Socialism come to fruition. I was from a large family and one of my brothers joined the LAH, also going on to win the Knight's Cross and hold the same rank as me. I met Reichsführer-SS Himmler at my commissioning, and he was pleased with the many Nordic-looking officers in my class, he said, "Men, your blood is a treasure, and must always be safeguarded, choose ye well the woman you will marry to continue this line." It gave me great pride to be in the most elite and loyal regiment of the SS and it is truly a pleasure to meet someone so young who understands why I feel this way. I do not even talk to my family, as they cannot understand what it meant to me, and still means to me to this day. This is why I meet

often with comrades like Adi and Willi. We are loyal until the end.



What was your impression of Hitler, and did you ever meet him personally?

Max: Yes, we were his personal bodyguard, so we saw him often. I met him once on my birthday, and when he found out, he had a cake made for me and sent his personal greeting. He was a man who was warm and very friendly. My thoughts were that he was not the usual politician in his demeanor, but much more related to the common person. No other leader has been so popular and loved. He was able to rise from the ranks of commoners and lead because he was a commoner and spoke the language of the people. He always made a very good impression on me and I was proud to wear his name on my sleeve band. He brought out the best in the German people and taught us to work together to build a nation and culture that was envied by many. This is why so many stayed loyal to him, even through the victor's lies and rumors, we knew him, and knew his deeds. He lived and died for us.



You were involved in the Polish campaign?

Max: Yes, the LAH Brigade was involved in Poland. We were guarding the flank of an army division then. The LAH was ordered to war on the 1st of September and moved into enemy territory, which had previously been German before Versailles took it away. I still see the people who greeted us when we advanced; they thanked us for freeing them from Polish oppression. The Poles massed army units on the border, which were broken by superior air and artillery. At first it seemed like a vast parade, civilians cheered us in every village and town we entered. It was only when we advanced deeper that things changed. We had to fight off Polish cavalry attacks and other uncoordinated actions. I felt sorry for them, as they had been inflamed by their war hungry leaders and were falling when they did not need to. I looked upon the countless prisoners we captured with pity. One young boy who looked not even 17 and was shot in his arm; our medics bandaged him and I offered him a piece of chocolate I had. Many Polish soldiers behaved well and had good military training, which kept them disciplined in defeat. My company had a good deal of prisoners to deal with and we talked to them for a long time before sending them to the rear.

Many told us that war was not what they wanted, and we joked with them that they were going towards Berlin [the Polish government had recently bragged in the news how they were going to march into Berlin-Ed.], but not in the way they thought. Polish civilians were friendly and not even scared; Germans had been this way before [during World War One]. As we got deeper into enemy land, mines and attacks by armored cars, with a few cavalry slowed us. The Allies claimed they bravely attacked Panzers like knights of old, we did not have Panzers, but they did. Our column of old trucks and cars repulsed them quite easily. The Pole was a brave fighter, but not good at tactics. Our small regiment marched on; by now the Poles had been broken into surrounded groups, which other units mopped up. We were able to rest for a few days; gypsies came and tried to sell us items, but we knew their tricks and watched our wallets.



What was the campaign against France like?

Max: I was now in the 12th MG Company and we were moved to the Dutch border in May. Given the order to start the attack, we crossed and easily brushed the Dutch aside, they had no appetite for war. Our mission was to link up with our paratroops. I remember the long columns of prisoners, and we felt unstoppable. We advanced into France and attacked Tommy [British soldiers], stopping their attack at Arras and pushing them back to Dunkirk. It was with confusion and anger we were ordered to

stop our attack. Sepp Dietrich was livid, and even pressed a new attack against the enemy on the opposite side of a canal; he earned the Knight's Cross for this decisive attack that could have kept going. The Führer appeared to have let Tommy off the hook, if Sepp Dietrich was allowed, we would have smashed the pocket. I will tell you also, we were prepared for a long battle with the French, but our successful tactics routed them and brought us victory in a month. After Dunkirk, we had free movement in France; our biggest task was helping the millions of refugees who had been told to flee. Our medical unit often stopped to help French families needing food and care. We passed a pioneer unit helping a farmer rebuild his fence and recapture his cows. We called them the farmhand platoon after, I remember that.

The English claims that the LAH murdered 80 prisoners at Wormhout [France] in 1940?

Max: These are only claims. No one I have spoken to knows anything about this. Lately renewed cries have gone out to prosecute Willi, and others. I looked into this with Willi, as he is part of our comrade's association. We found not one soldier who saw anything regarding this incident. Either the English soldiers have made this story up, or our men are lying. Since our policy was very clear, with clear orders to take prisoners and bring no harm to them, it is hard to believe the English. I can tell you if a soldier killed a prisoner he would go before a court of honor. It is not impossible that soldiers, who survived humiliating defeats when they were told the fight would be easy, could make up lies regarding their enemy. I do know that some British units used illegal ammunition [exploding bullets, for example] and deception, but the units we fought against fought with honor. We would have had no cause to shoot prisoners, unless there were fights or unruly prisoners that invited retaliation. But this is not what they claim, they claim grenades were thrown at them in a barn and then they were executed, with some surviving. It makes no sense and I believe they concocted this while in POW camps as a way to get revenge on their enemies. We fought the war with honor and had strict rules regarding treatment of prisoners; even partisans were many times afforded protection, when the rope should have been their fate. All men of the SS would have revolted in anger if we had to be used as executioners of civilians or prisoners. Did we at times have to do battlefield justice regarding partisans? Yes we did. It disgusted me to see our men used this way, but you must remember these were reprisals for crimes of murder in most all cases.



You won the Knight's Cross retaking Kharkov, can you describe this battle?

Max: At this time I was in command of a Panzer grenadier unit and so fought alongside our Panzer regiment. For the LAH this was our greatest victory, as we smashed a superior army. We had just returned after a long stay in France to halt the Russian advance post Stalingrad. Kharkov had fallen, and we engaged fresh Russian divisions; this time our division had better Panzers including a new weapon: the Tiger. The Tiger was able to knock out all enemy armor, and they feared this weapon. The LAH halted the Russians, and by March we were prepared to recapture lost ground. The city was the prize and [Sepp] Dietrich briefed us on how important the coming battle would be. The Russians fortified every barn, house and building in the surrounding area; we were hungry to attack to get payback for the loss at Stalingrad. Our guns were red hot and steaming after knocking out the many strongpoints.



LAH entering Kharkov, 1943

When we attacked the city there was heavy snow, I remember that, and it was cold. This was our second winter on the Eastern Front, and now we were better prepared with warm clothing and better treatments for vehicles and weapons. The Panzer regiment smashed through the Russian defenses, and the grenadiers were right behind. Our men had to take every house, and the Panzers were engaged at every corner; the Russians were very cunning fighters and placed anti-tank guns at angles hard to see. I saw an opportunity to move into the square and took it, knocking out nests of resistance and forcing the enemy to scatter. We broke through to the square with minimal losses and secured the area while battling snipers and stragglers. We named the square after our division. My men were brave and faced uneven odds that would have stopped ordinary soldiers, but not the LAH. In addition, a Russian hospital housed many wounded soldiers and civilians, close to our positions. They claim we shot all the wounded, we did not. I was appalled when we entered that the staff and doctors had fled, apparently the commissars ordered them to leave since they were too valuable to lose. Our medical staff was far behind, and not in the city, so many of the badly wounded succumbed, as there was no treatment. We did what we could for them, but several did die, and we had prisoners carry them outside. I witnessed German dead also, that prisoners told us, were refused any treatment. This was a

very hard-fought battle and showed a smaller German force could still defeat a larger Russian army. It gave us renewed confidence and we held onto this area against heavy attacks with very little losses. I was proud when Dietrich advised me I was being awarded the Knight's Cross, but my men earned the award; it is the men under my command whom I owe the decorations to.



How did you view the Russian soldier?

Max: He was, and always will be, a fiend. They fought like criminals in a dark alley. They had no honor then and no honor now. I personally saw them shoot prisoners and civilians. I remember I was with the Panzer regiment watching the Russians retake a village we gave up. The first act they did was pull the civilians out of their huts, they obviously were asking who worked with us or helped us. A partisan pointed out a few people, and a commissar shot them. I asked if the Panzer could open fire, but they needed to save rounds for a counter-attack. Even though Sepp Dietrich was able to secure the best and newest weapons for the LAH, the same issue the army had, too few supplies and ammunition at times, cursed us. We saw this behavior repeatedly; we had to contend with fanatical soldiers who, until killed or captured, would use any means to kill. They had such stockpiles of ammunition; they shelled recklessly, often-destroying places where we were not. They were masters at playing dead and shooting soldiers in the back. They used civilians as shields and went to great lengths to be cruel. Anyone they were told had helped a German was shot, or if they were lucky, sent to camps. We had Russian helpers, and one told us the reason Russians were scared to surrender was they were fearful their families behind the front would suffer as traitors. They had political officers that went around taking names and addresses of the families so if the soldier deserted, the family paid the price. I saw one of these lists on a captured officer. How anyone defended this regime I still cannot understand, and today our young are taught we were the monsters. It is true that some Soviets showed restraint and fair play, but my experience with them

was not good and left me with bad observations. Germany surrendered in 1945; they did not return prisoners until 1955. They accused us of crime after crime, including killing millions of their prisoners. The truth is many of their prisoners joined us; the ones who did not were treated fairly. Stalin had many former prisoners killed for surrendering, then blamed the loss on us. The propaganda films they show for their newsreels show a happy, peaceful army being welcomed by the citizens as liberators and heroes. Their propaganda companies staged all these. Most Russians opposed the Soviets and thanked us for giving them religious freedom again. Before the attack on Kharkov, an Orthodox Priest came out to bless the Panzers of the division.

What about the SS being labeled as a criminal organization at the post-war trials?

Max: While some men who wore the uniform may not have acted within the rules of war in a time of heated anger, I do not believe we were any more criminal than our adversaries. I can speak for my men, and I will tell you clearly and without reservation, we are not criminals. We defended our nation, oftentimes against very brutal foes who fought with hate against us. We allowed many men from many different nations to join us, and I saw with my own eyes some of the actions they were in, they fought bravely and with honor also. At times, when dealing with illegal partisans, they showed no mercy, but partisan warfare often had no mercy. The people who decided to pick up arms against us while not wearing a uniform were criminals themselves, and the results of their actions killed people who should not have died. Exacting a reprisal to stop this was not a crime. The storytellers today teach our grandchildren that we lived only to roam from town to town rounding up civilians and shooting them. This is nonsense and is only getting worse. A local school uses a former Communist camp inmate who gets to teach these students that we lined up orphans and used them for target practice to sight in new rifles. An Italian Communist partisan claimed we used Panzers to run over sick orphans, and then bayoneted them for good measure. It is a circus with the lies they can tell. This should be a crime, as it tells a tale that we issued strict orders to target any civilians, especially Jews, and the Catholic Church is jumping in now claiming we killed both wherever we went. Most all SS men were members of the church; this is ridiculous. They also claim we persecuted Christians on the Reichsführer-SS Himmler's orders, what stupidity. We cannot fight against these lies either. Back in the fifties and sixties we could to a degree, but now laws are made that make any attempt to challenge the Allied version of the war a crime. Some former soldiers have lost pensions due to this. Now most everyone shuts up, and just tries to get by, trying to forget what we went through. We must be very careful with whom we speak to as well, the wrong word in the wrong hands invites charges and attacks. I fear they may prey on us, as we age and our memories fade when we say things we do not mean. The occupiers (the Jew) control this apostate Federal Republic.

Do you believe Germany could have won the war?

Max: We could have won, but it would have meant arming for war much earlier, bringing new weapons to us earlier, finding traitors earlier, and allowing the SS to be independent. We could not hope to match the output of the Allies, so all we could do was quick victories and then negotiated peace treaties. In this we failed, and in the end, we were beaten by superior numbers and weapons; ours were too few.

Max Hansen's Knight's Cross recommendation awarded on March 28th, 1943:

"SS-Sturmbannführer Hansen has highly distinguished himself in the campaigns in

Poland, the West, the Balkans and Russia (1941/42 and 1942/43).

Following the capture of Rostov on the 20.11.1941, in the winter battles of 1941/42, Hansen was decorated with the German Cross in Gold.

By the 11.03.1943 Kampfgruppe Witt had thrust through Polewaja—Dertgatschi—Pscherkaskaja-Losswaja, the ultimate aim being to move along the Belgorod—Kharkov road in order to strike Kharkov from the north.

On the 10.03.1943 Hansen and his Bataillon captured Dertgatschi in a bitter house-to-house fight and furthermore captured the village of Ssekeniki in the twilight of the same day.

A morning attack on the 11.03.1943 along both sides of the march route by a reinforced Battalion of Kampfgruppe Witt came under heavy defensive fire to the north and west of Bypredem and bogged down.

Kampfgruppe Hansen, deployed to take control of the district of Schatiliwka to the west of here, succeeded in penetrating past the southern edge of Bypredem after a ferocious urban battle.

Later on the same day, SS-Sturmbannführer Hansen made the independent decision to move against the northern edge of Kharkov's city centre.

At 12:00 on this day he and his men reached the so-called 'Red Square' (or 'Square of the Wehrmacht') after hard fighting through houses and streets.

Fierce enemy counterattacks from the south and southeast were repulsed with bloody losses for the enemy. After leaving behind a small security force at the 'Red Square',

SS-Sturmbannführer took the bulk of his Battalion along the road to Belgorod on his own initiative to permit the bulk of the Regiment to enter Kharkov.

With its commander at the spearhead, the Battalion succeeded in capturing an extremely strong roadblock at the northern edge of Kharkov and removing it.

Through the decisiveness and personal example of SS-Sturmbannführer Hansen, and the élan of his troops in the tough urban combat, the way for the bulk of the Regiment into the inner part of Kharkov was opened up, and the capture of the northern part of the city was ensured. Having personally participated in the close combat, SS-Sturmbannführer Hansen was wounded here for the fourth time by a shell splinter in his face.

On the 12.03.1943 the northern part of Kharkov was finally cleared of the enemy and declared secure following hard and costly fighting.

Here as well SS-Sturmbannführer Hansen further distinguished himself through his personal example of courage and bravery.

On the 13.03.1943 another Kampfgruppe, deployed from Dergatschi to Kharkov, succeeded in entering the north and northwestern part of Kharkov and capturing the village of Alexajewka.

In order to facilitate the further advance of this Kampfgruppe, Hansen once again moved with his Kampfgruppe on his own initiative to a point about a kilometre west of the 'Red Square'.

By destroying 8 T-34s that were in front of the Kampfgruppe that was attacking from

Dergatschi, the way for this Kampfgruppe into the northwestern part of the city was opened.

The establishment of contact between both Kampfgruppen in the area just south of the 'Red Square' laid the groundwork for the continuation of the battle within the city centre and eastern part of Kharkov."