

# AFTER THE BATTLE



# AIRBORNE RAID ON TITO'S HEADQUARTERS



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**Front Cover:** On May 25, 1944, German Fallschirmjäger carried out a surprise airborne assault on the town of Drvar in northern Bosnia with mission to capture Field-Marshal Tito (*inset top right*), whose command post was in a cave just outside the town (*arrowed*). They failed to catch Tito but did hit upon one of his uniforms (*bottom right*).

**Back Cover:** Denis Kelly with his son Denis Jr at the Bomber Command Memorial in London (see story page 50). Denis went on 30 operations over Europe before being shot down on the night of July 18/19, 1944. See also: [www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2014/s4019723.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2014/s4019723.htm)

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**Photo Credit Abbreviations:** IWM —Imperial War Museum; SMCH —Slovenian Museum of Contemporary History, Ljubljana.



IWM NA15131

Josip Broz-Tito was born in 1892 in the village of Kumrovec in Croatia. A metal worker by training, at an early age he joined the labour movement and the socialist party. Conscripted into the Austrian-Hungarian Army in 1913, he served with distinction during the First World War but was seriously wounded and captured by the Imperial Russians in 1915. He spent a year in a Russian hospital before being transferred to a work camp in the Ural Mountains. Making his way to St Petersburg, he participated in the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and later joined a Red Guard unit in Omsk. Upon his return home in 1920, Broz found himself in the newly established Kingdom of Yugoslavia, where he joined the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. In 1928, by then secretary of the party's Zagreb branch, he was arrested for illegal communist activities and sentenced to five years in prison. After his release, he lived incognito and assumed a number of noms de guerre, among them 'Walter' and 'Tito'. In 1934 he went to Vienna, where the party's Central Committee had sought refuge, and was appointed to become a member. The following year he went to the Soviet Union to work for the Comintern, also joining the Soviet Communist Party and the NKVD secret police. Sent back to Yugoslavia in 1937 to purge the still-outlawed Communist Party there, he became its Secretary-General. When the Axis countries invaded Yugoslavia in April 1941, the Communists initially kept a low profile but in June 1941, after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, Tito took to the hills, organising the partisan movement and engaging in guerrilla warfare against the occupying forces. By 1944, his Army of National Liberation had grown to well over 300,000.



Tito's headquarters was located at Drvar, a small wood-logging town in northern Bosnia. With a pre-war population of 3,000 most people worked in the town's cellulose factory.



SMCH

On May 25, 1944, the German army in Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia launched Operation 'Rösselsprung' (Knight's Move in chess), a major offensive against the elusive partisan army in northern Bosnia. As part of this undertaking, SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500 executed a surprise airborne attack by parachute and glider on the town of Drvar in an attempt to capture or kill Field-Marshal Tito and wipe out his Supreme Headquar-

ters. Although the SS paratroop battalion made a successful assault landing and captured the town, they failed to find Tito, who narrowly managed to make good his escape from his command post. Soon encircled by superior partisan forces who rushed to the scene in fierce counter-attack, the German airborne force had to fight for its life before being finally rescued by ground units the following morning.

# OPERATION 'RÖSSELSPRUNG'

## THE AIRBORNE RAID ON TITO'S HEADQUARTERS

In April 1941, Nazi Germany together with its allies Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria invaded and occupied the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The country was then partitioned amongst the victors: an extremely Fascist puppet regime, the Ustashe under Ante Pavelic, was set up in Croatia, and German, Italian and Rumanian troops were stationed in the rest of the country.

Resistance against foreign occupation soon sprang up in the form of two guerrilla movements. One were the Chetniks, the Royalist and mostly Serbian guerrillas under Colonel Draza Mihailovic, an officer of the pre-war Yugoslav Army. The other were the Partisans, the Communist and pan-Slavic fighters under their charismatic leader Josip Broz-Tito, the secretary-general of the Yugoslav Communist Party. The two movements had completely different strategies and aims. Mihailovic's approach was to mostly abide his time in the mountains to await an Allied invasion after which his troops would come out to restore the Serb monarchy. Tito's strategy was to strike at the Germans whenever and wherever he could, regardless of the risks or the inevitable reprisals, and, once victorious, to create a Communist-led people's republic of Yugoslavia. The political divergence quickly led to internal strife. The Chetniks, who had initially been fighting the Germans,

soon changed their focus to destroying the Partisans and the struggle quickly devolved into a state of civil war. In their fervour to annihilate the Partisans, the Chetniks even engaged in secret or open collaboration with the Germans and Italians and with the Croat Ustashe.

The Western Allies, notably Britain, initially supported Mihailovic, sending in weapons, supplies and money to the Chetniks. However, after agents of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) parachuted into Yugoslavia reported in early 1943 that Tito's partisans were doing most of the fighting against the Germans, Britain changed sides and the bulk of the support thereafter went to the Communists.

In the three years since 1941, the Axis armies launched six big offensives aimed at encircling and destroying the growing partisan army. However, each time Tito, his staff and large bodies of partisans managed to escape from every trap and all efforts to annihilate them came to nothing. On the contrary, when Italy capitulated in September 1943, the partisans captured huge amounts of arms and equipment from the Italian divisions stranded in Yugoslavia, enabling them to set up several new divisions of what was by then known as the National Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (NOVJ).

By Karel Margry

By the spring of 1944 the NOVJ had grown to more than 300,000 men, organised in 11 army corps with 39 divisions and several independent brigades. While the German forces held the towns and cities with strong garrisons and guarded the major roads and railways, the partisans were masters of large tracts of the rugged and mountainous countryside, which in effect could be seen as 'liberated territory'.

With the faltering of Unternehmen 'Schwarz' (the Sixth Offensive, as the partisans called it) during the winter of 1943-44, the German High Command began to realise that it was losing the initiative in Yugoslavia. The Anglo-American advance in Italy and the Soviet advance in the East were forcing the Wehrmacht to withdraw divisions from the Balkans: two had already gone to Italy in early spring and four had been sent to occupy Hungary in March. Since further attempts to annihilate the partisans by large-scale attacks were clearly out of the question, an alternative plan was devised: a bold stroke at its centre might paralyse the partisan leadership, thus restoring the initiative to the Germans, and might even kill or capture Tito and his staff as well.



ERFNOU



IWM NA15113

**Left:** Tito's command post at Drvar was in a natural cave just outside the town. It lay well hidden up in a cleft in the rock face. **Right:** A wooden cabin had been built directly in front of

the cave entrance. This served as workspace for Tito and the members of his General Staff, the cavern itself being mainly used as shelter during the frequent Axis air attacks on Drvar.

#### THE SEARCH FOR TITO

The idea for an action against Tito's headquarters had been the subject of several earlier plans, notably with the Division Brandenburg, the special forces division formed by the German Abwehr (military intelligence) for commando and covert operations.

In the late summer of 1943, the division had set up a small special unit in Vienna. Known as Einheit Kirchner, after its commander, Oberleutnant Wolfram Kirchner, its special purpose was to gather intelligence and develop plans for an operation against Tito's headquarters. In October, having completed its training, the platoon-size unit was sent to Banja Luka in northern Bosnia, beginning operations under direct command of division headquarters. When in December another, similar Brandenburg unit under Hauptmann Boeckl arrived in Banja Luka from Greece, the two were merged into one,

with Boeckl taking command. He divided the unit into two platoons, one under himself, the other under Kirchner.

In gathering intelligence, the unit made good use of the local Chetnik leaders, Uros Drenovic and Lazo Tesanovic, whose men knew how to move through partisan-controlled areas relatively freely, had good contacts with anti-Communist peasants, and could investigate the whereabouts of Tito's command centre relatively unnoticed.

In late 1943, after the unit learned that Tito had moved his headquarters to the town of Jajce in central Bosnia, they developed two plans for an action against it. One called for a nightly surprise raid, to be carried out by men of the unit together with Chetnik fighters, all dressed up in partisan uniforms, with the idea to kidnap or eliminate Tito. Another called for two corpses (murdered prisoners of war), dressed in British military

uniforms and fitted out with parachutes, to be dropped from an aircraft near Jajce. Ostensibly killed by malfunctioning chutes, one was to carry a letter addressed to Tito personally, which on opening would explode and, hopefully, kill the partisan leader. Neither plan materialised because, before they could be carried out, counter-partisan action by regular German forces under Operation 'Schwarz' forced Tito to move his headquarters in early January 1944.

At the end of February, Hauptmann Boeckl was relieved of his post and succeeded by Major Ernst Benesch. He rapidly expanded the unit to one of battalion size. Einheit Benesch, as it was now known, continued its search for Tito's headquarters. About this time, they learned that Tito had moved his command post to Drvar, a small rural industrial town in western Bosnia about 90 kilometres south-west of Banja Luka.



IWM NA15114

Armed sentries from the Supreme Headquarters' Escort Battalion guarded the command post.



ATB

The same view today. The cabin is not the original but a post-war replica.



**Right: On May 4, 1944, a party of four Allied war reporters had arrived in Drvar to publicise Tito and the little-known struggle of the partisans to the Western world. They had been flown in to the partisan airstrip at Bosanski Petrovac. Here three of them — (L-R) John Talbot of Reuters, representing the combined British Press (leaning against the tree); Stoyan Pribichevich of *Fortune* and *Time* magazines (a Croat-born American citizen) for the American Press, and Chief Petty Officer 'Gene' Fowler (a US Army cine cameraman) — are interviewing Vladislav Ribnikar, Tito's Minister of Information, with the help of a female interpreter. The picture was taken by the fourth man, photographer Sergeant Max Slade of the British Army Film and Photo Unit.**



IWM NA15105

Soon after, this location was confirmed by wireless intelligence. In early 1942, the Oberbefehlshaber Süd-Ost (German Commander-in-Chief South-East) had assigned the German commander in Bosnia a special wireless monitoring platoon. Commanded by Hauptmann Wollny, and made up of expert personnel from Nachrichten-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 4 stationed at Saloniki in northern Greece, its task was to intercept and decrypt enemy radio traffic. In the summer of 1943 the whole Abteilung, including Wollny's platoon, was sent to Belgrade and within a few months they were able to listen in on the majority of the partisans' radio traffic. Deciphering the enemy messages was not so difficult but identifying the location of their headquarters was more problematic due to the extreme mobility of the guerrillas. However, in late February 1944, using cross-bearings from several receiving stations, Wollny's unit managed to pinpoint Tito's headquarters to the town of Drvar.

A decisive role in the search for Tito's HQ was played by the Abwehr's regular sub-branches, notably its Abteilung I (espionage) and Abteilung II (counter-espionage). Since a re-organisation in August 1943, both departments had representing agencies at all levels of army command on the Balkans: at Heeresgruppe F there were Front-Aufklärungs-Kommandos 111 and 201; subordinate to them on army level, attached to 2. Panzer-Armee headquarters, were Führender Front-Aufklärungs-Trupp 176 and Front-Aufklärungs-Trupp 216, the latter stationed at Sisak. Working together with the Ic (chief intelligence officer) at their respective headquarters, these units assembled and collated all the intelligence on enemy troop strength and locations gathered from espionage, wireless monitoring and Sicherheitsdienst, Geheime Feldpolizei and Feldkommandantur sources. It was they who finally determined in early March that Tito's HQ was definitely at Drvar.

Final confirmation came in mid-May, when the Abwehr intercepted a cable from the Yugoslav military attaché in Washington to his Royal Army counterpart in Cairo giving the location of Tito's HQ at Drvar.

SS-Sturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny, the man who had snatched Italian Duce Benito Mussolini from the Gran Sasso in September

1943 (see *After the Battle* No. 22), was for a short time also involved in the search for Tito. Ordered by Hitler and the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW — German Armed Forces High Command) to find and capture Tito, he flew to Belgrade in mid-April but found Abwehr intelligence reports there inaccurate and contradictory. Deciding to find out for himself, he drove to Zagreb and, with the help of men from his SS-Jagdverband Süd-Ost (the section of his special forces unit stationed in Bosnia), eventually learned around mid-May that Tito was in Drvar. Skorzeny wanted to kidnap or kill Tito in a small, stealthy commando-type operation and sent his adjutant, SS-Hauptsturmführer Adrian von Fölkersam, to headquarters of the XV. Gebirgs-Armee Korps in Banja Luka to inform General der Infanterie Ernst von Leyser of his scheme. The latter was already developing his own plans, and probably did not like SS interference anyway, and gave Fölkersam a cold shoulder. Skorzeny, who thought any large-scale operation in Bosnia stood no chance of success because its security would always be compromised by loose talking, thereupon withdrew from the mission and had no further part in it.

### THE PARTISAN FORCES IN DRVAR

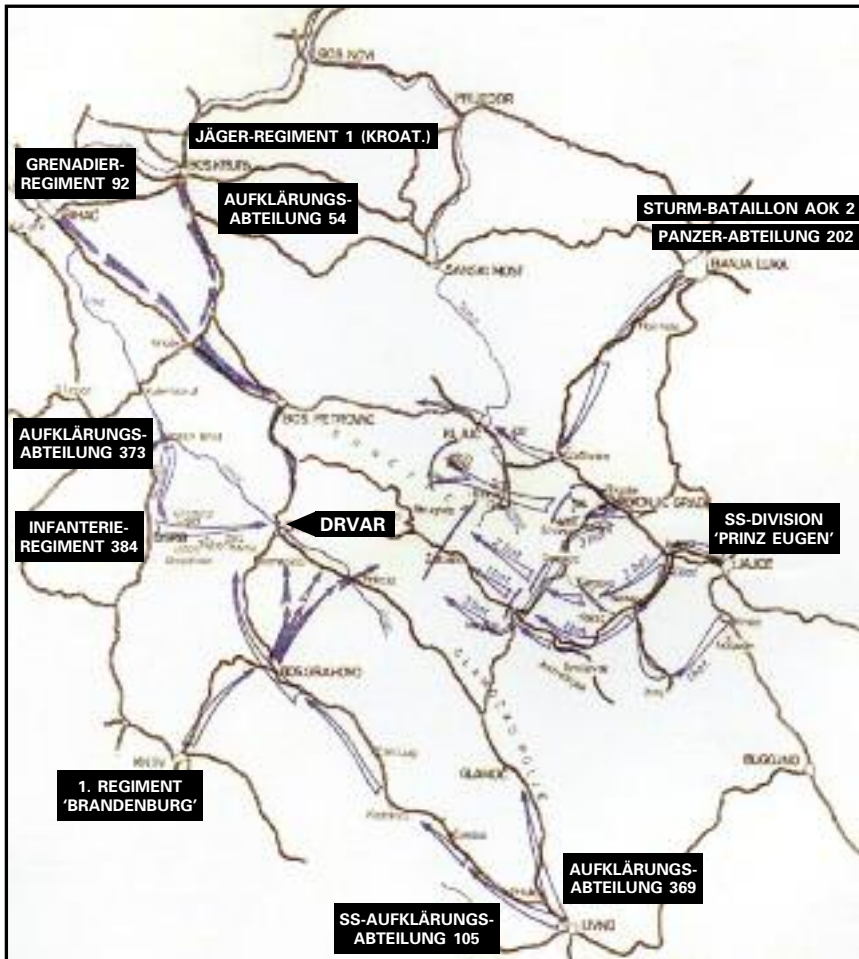
The small town of Drvar had been chosen as partisan headquarters for the excellent tactical reason that approach to it was difficult. The town, which earned a living from a large saw-mill and cellulose factory, lay in a wide green valley with the Jasenovac Mountains rising steeply to the north and high steep wooded hills surrounding it on all other sides. Entry was limited to three roads through defiles that could be easily blocked. The Unac river flowed just north of the town, forming a further barrier where a strong defence could be put up. Of an original pre-war population of 3,000, by early 1944 only some 200 remained, most others having fled from the German bombings of the town.

When Tito and his staff arrived in Drvar on January 22, they initially set up headquarters in a house in the town. However, fearing a German air attack, they soon moved to a safer place, a natural cave located in a cleft in the escarpment just north of the town. It was just across the Unac river from the town, some 15 metres high up in a wooded ravine, with a narrow flight of stone steps cut out from the rock leading up to it. The cave had a narrow entrance but there were wider

**Right: On May 14, 1944, Slade pictured Tito with his Cabinet Ministers and Supreme Staff at the cabin. In the front row (L-R) are Vladislav Ribnikar (Minister of Information), Colonel Filipovic, Edvard Kardelj (member of the Central Committee of the Yugoslav Communist Party and one of Tito's closest confidants) and Tito. In the back row (L-R) are Major-General Arso Jovanovic (Chief-of-Staff), Radonja (Tito's secretary), Rodoljub Colakovic (Secretary of the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia), Edvard Kocbek (Minister of Education, a non-Communist) and Lieutenant-General Sreten Zujovic. Tito's dog Tiger in the foreground.**



IWM NA15129



**Operation 'Rösselsprung' envisaged eight strong motorised Kampfgruppen — 16,000 men in all — launching a concentric attack towards Drvar. The two main formations involved were the 373. (kroatische) Infanterie-Division attacking from the west and the 7. SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgs-Division 'Prinz Eugen' coming in from the east.**

spaces deeper inside, providing enough room for the whole staff. Men of the Engineer Brigade attached to the Partisan HQ erected a wooden hut in front of the cave, with a veranda that commanded a fine view of the town across the river, the whole valley and its approaches. This cabin served as Tito's quarters and office when there was no air raid alarm.

When German aerial attacks on the town and villages in the region increased in the early spring, Tito took into use a second cave, this one located at the village of Bastasi, six kilometres to the west. This is where he stayed during the day, every evening travelling by Jeep to the Drvar cave, where the rest of his command staff remained as before.

The partisans were both a military and a political movement and with the arrival of Tito's Supreme Headquarters (which itself combined the High Command of the partisan army and the Politburo of the Communist Party all in one) several national and regional political bodies had also settled down in Drvar. Prime among them were the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (Antifasisticko Vijeće Narodnog Oslobođenja Jugoslavije — AVNOJ), the provisional parliament set up by the partisans in November 1942; the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia; the Central Committee of the Young Communist League of Yugoslavia (Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije — SKOJ); and the District Committee of the SKOJ.

As part of the political activity, the Unified League of Anti-Fascist Youth of Yugoslavia

(Ujedinjeni savez antifasističke omladine Jugoslavije — USAOJ), an offspring of SKOJ, was assembling for its second national congress, to be held in Drvar on May 2-4, and so several hundred young delegates from all over the country were arriving in the town in late April. The congress assembled in one of the big halls of the cellulose factory with Tito delivering the opening address to the 816 attendants.

Also stationed in Drvar were members of Allied military missions that had been sent to Tito's headquarters by their respective governments. The British Military Mission — the senior of the three, as it originated from the SOE agents infiltrated into Yugoslavia as early as May 1943 — was led by Brigadier Fitzroy Maclean, a confidant of British Prime Minister Churchill. A prominent member of his 18-man team was Randolph Churchill, son of the Prime Minister. (When the airborne raid came on May 25, both Maclean and Churchill would be absent from Drvar, the former having returned to London in early April for an interim report and the latter having left the town with one of the partisan units, and command of the mission was exercised by Lieutenant-Colonel Vivian Street.) The American Military Mission, sent out by the Office of Strategic Service (OSS) in August 1943 and including since February a three-man USAAF meteorological unit under Captain Cecil E. Drew, was commanded by Major Linn M. Farish. (The American team was subordinated to the British Mission, a truly independent US mission not being created until September 1944.) The Soviet Military Mission, which had arrived in three American-towed Waco

gliders at the snow-covered partisan airfield at Bosanski Petrovac on February 23, was led by Lieutenant-General Nikita Kornejev.

With Tito rapidly becoming one of the heroes of Allied propaganda, the Western Allied missions had recently been joined by four Allied war correspondents: John Talbot of Reuters, Stoyan Pribichevich of *Fortune* and *Time* magazines and two official photographers, Chief Petty Officer G. E. Fowler of the US Navy and Sergeant Max Slade of the British Army Film and Photo Unit.

Protection of the partisan command centre was the task of the Headquarters Escort Battalion. About 350 men and women strong, it comprised four companies, three of them infantry and one anti-aircraft. The 1st Company was stationed at Drvar; the 2nd at Bastasi; the 3rd was manning the anti-aircraft defences — seven captured Italian AA machine guns — on high ground just north and south of Drvar, and the 4th was protecting the Allied missions. There was also a small tank platoon from the I Proletarian Corps, which had three captured Italian CV-35 light tanks, and was leaguered near the hamlet of Trninic Brijeg, one kilometre to the south. Immediate protection of the HQ cave consisted of five sentries armed with machine pistols, three immediately in front of the cave and two at their billet buildings nearby.

There were few partisan units in the town itself, the Luftwaffe raids having forced them to disperse in the hills around the town where they formed a loose perimeter. Apart from the Escort Battalion and the Engineers Brigade, the latter about 300 strong but not very well armed, the only other military unit in the near neighbourhood was the Officers' School at the hamlet of Zavade (Sipovljani), three kilometres south-east of Drvar, which in May had some 130 cadets. So altogether there were perhaps 800 men and women partisan fighters in or near Drvar. Field defences were limited to slit trenches for air attack and gun-pits for the AA machine guns.

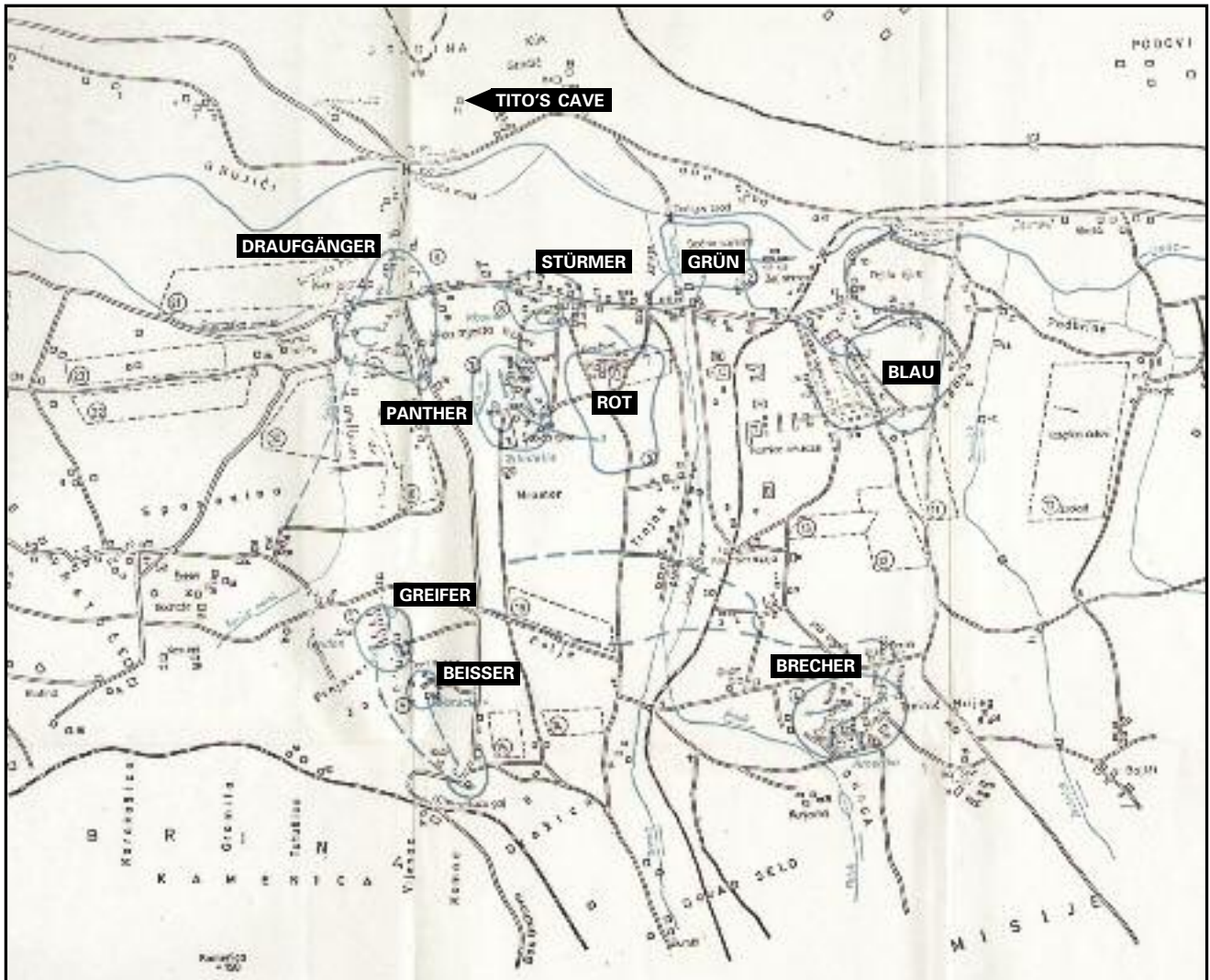
Partisan forces in the wider area amounted to six divisions of the National Liberation Army: the 1st and 6th Divisions of the I Proletarian Corps (Major-General Koca Popovic) to the east and west of Drvar respectively; the 4th, 10th and 39th Divisions of the V Corps (Major-General Slavko Rodic) to the north and north-east, and the 9th Division of the VIII Dalmatian Corps (Major-General Vladimir Cetkovic) to the south-east. As signs of a possible attack on Drvar increased in early March, Tito's staff decided to reinforce the garrison and ordered the 2nd Brigade of the 6th Division to Drvar. This increased the number of troops considerably. On April 28, this unit was replaced by the 3rd Lika Brigade of the same division. However, on May 15, as the threat of an attack seemed to have subsided, this brigade was assigned to division reserve and transferred to Trubar, 13 kilometres west of Drvar.

#### OPERATION 'RÖSSELSPRUNG'

In late April, Generalfeldmarschall Maximilian von Weichs, the Oberbefehlshaber Süd-Ost and also commander of Heeresgruppe F, instructed Generaloberst Lothar Rendulic, the commander of the 2. Panzer-Armee, to plan an offensive operation against Tito's headquarters. Rendulic was to launch a surprise attack with strong forces in the area delineated by the towns of Bugojno — Jajce — Banja Luka — Prijedor — Bihać — Knin, an area of over 750 square kilometres, with the intention to disrupt Tito's High Command, break up the partisan formations and subsequently hunt down and destroy them.

The operation was to be carried out by forces from two of the army's four corps, the V. SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgs-Korps and the XV. Gebirgs-Armee-Korps. In order to assemble enough forces for the new offensive, Rendulic was to denude other operational areas of





ODIC DESANT NA DRVAR

The plan for the airborne attack on Drvar called for SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500 to drop three parachute groups — Grün (Green), Blau (Bleu) and Rot (Red) — on drop zones north, east and south of the town. Simultaneously, six glider-borne groups were to land close to specific objectives: Gruppe 'Panther' was to take the suspected site of Tito's headquarters ('Zitadelle'); 'Draufgänger'

to take the crossroads at the western end of town ('Westkreuz') and capture several buildings around it that were assumed to house the partisans' communications centre; 'Greifer' to capture the British Military Mission ('London'), 'Stürmer' the Soviet Military Mission ('Moskau'); 'Brecher' the US Military Mission ('Amerika') and 'Beisser' an outpost wireless position ('Warschau').

the two corps, and enlist as many formations of the collaborationist Croat Army as security would allow. From Heeresgruppe reserve he would get Panzer-Abteilung 202, the 4. Regiment 'Brandenburg' and Grenadier-Regiment 92 (mot.).

On May 5, von Weichs forwarded Rendulic's draft plan to the OKW, asking for the release of Gebirgs-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 54 (the reconnaissance unit of the 1. Gebirgs-Division), which was in OKW reserve, and more units from the Brandenburg Division. At the same time he requested to be given the use of SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500.

While approving the request for the mountain reconnaissance battalion, the OKW at first turned down the request for the SS parachute battalion, in view of the fact that Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler had earmarked it for anti-partisan operations in the mountains of upper Slovenia. However, on being contacted by the OKW, Himmler agreed to release the unit and the OKW cabled Weichs on May 7 that it was available for Rendulic's offensive. By then, Hitler had also reviewed the plan, the OKW informing Weichs that the Führer judged it paramount that the offensive attempt to target Tito's headquarters and, if possible, destroy it; and that Weichs investigate whether SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500 could not be used for this special purpose.

On May 13, the OKW cabled Weichs further instructions. In view of the fact that in most previous offensives the partisan forces had been able to escape in mass from the German attacks, the surprise element must have top priority. Therefore, the offensive was to kick off with a surprise attack by the SS paratroop battalion on the enemy's command centre. This was to be carried out with strong Luftwaffe support, in conjunction with covert units of the Brandenburg Division (operating disguised as partisans), and without any regard for the risks involved. Next, strong mobile Kampfgruppen (if possible, also disguised) were to be pushed forward via the main highways in a concentric attack on the partisan centre, clearing these roads in combat, destroying the partisans' road-bound heavy weapons and supply columns, wiping out partisan camps, and finally linking up with and relieving the airborne troops. Only then were the troops to begin a systematic mopping-up of the main partisan-held areas.

With these considerations in mind, Rendulic set about making his final plans and on May 21 the order was ready.

The operation — code-named 'Rösselsprung' (Knight's Move) — was to be under operational control of the XV. Gebirgs-Armeekorps, commanded by General der Infanterie Ernst von Leyser. From his head-

quarters at Bihac, Leyser would control all the SS, Army, Luftwaffe and Croat troops.

On 'X-Tag' (set for May 25), SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500 would make a surprise airborne assault on Drvar with the task of completely destroying Tito's main headquarters. At the same time eight strong motorised Kampfgruppen — 16,000 men in all — would launch a concentric attack towards Drvar:

From the east, 70 kilometres from Drvar, the 7. SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgs-Division 'Prinz Eugen' (SS-Oberführer Otto Kumm), with Panzergrenadier-Sturm-Bataillon AOK 2 (an army troops unit from 2. Panzer-Armee) and Panzer-Abteilung 202 under command, was to smash through enemy resistance east of the Sana river and advance on a broad front towards the Unac, their task being to take out enemy supply bases as well as to prevent the escape eastwards of the beaten enemy groups and headquarters. Specifically from the north-east, the Sturm-Bataillon and a company from Panzer-Abteilung 202 were to drive from Banja Luka towards Ključ; and from the south-east SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgsjäger-Regiment 13 was to advance from Jajce along the railways and roads to Savici and Mliniste.

From the south-east, SS-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 105 (a reconnaissance unit from corps troops of the V. SS-Gebirgs-Korps) was to drive out from Livno, 80 kilometres



HELMUTH SCHULTZ

**On May 19, six days before the raid, a Henschel Hs 126 reconnaissance aircraft from Nah-Aufklärungs-Staffel Kroatien operating from Bihac airfield took a series of vertical aerial photographs of Drvar and the surrounding area. They formed the basis for this annotated mosaic photo, identifying targets,**

**objectives and possible landing areas for gliders for 'Rösselsprung'. In spite of the photographic coverage, the German photo interpreters failed to identify Tito's command cave as they were unaware of its existence. (The full mosaic covered a wider area — we show only the main part.)**

from Drvar, and advance to Glamoc on the right and in the direction of Bosansko Grahovo on the left, its mission being to take out enemy supply bases in that area and prevent any southward escape of the 'bandit' groups, headquarters and military missions.

Also from the south-east, Aufklärungs-Abteilung 369 (the reconnaissance unit of the 369. (kroatische) Infanterie-Division) was to drive from Livno to Glamocko Polje and then to Drvar to intercept the withdrawing enemy. Livno was to be securely occupied.

From the south, the 1. Regiment 'Brandenburg' with subordinate mixed Croatian elements was to start out from Knin, 70 kilometres from Drvar, and advance via Bosansko Grahovo to Drvar.

From the west, the 373. (kroatische) Infanterie-Division (Generalleutnant Eduard Aldrian) was to launch a regimental combat group — Kampfgruppe Willam under Oberst Willam — from the town of Srb on the Una river, 25 kilometres from Drvar, with orders to advance at best speed via Trubar to Drvar and there relieve, at whatever cost and on the same day, the SS paratroop battalion. For this vital mission, Kampfgruppe Willam was to be made as strong as possible. It consisted of the II. and III. Bataillon of Grenadier-Regiment 384 (kroatisch) reinforced with artillery, heavy weapons and engineers. Further north in the divisional zone, Aufklärungs-Abteilung 373 was to advance on the left flank from Lapac via Kulen Vakuf to Vrtoce.

From the north, Grenadier-Regiment 92 (mot.) was to advance south-east from the town of Bihac, 75 kilometres from Drvar, while Gebirgs-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 54, supported by the Kroatische Jäger-Regiment 1, was to do the same from Bosanska Krupa. After meeting up at Vrtoce, they were to proceed south-east and capture the town of Bosanski Petrovac, a known enemy supply

and communications centre. Here they were to destroy partisan headquarters and capture the enemy airstrip and supply base there. Grenadier-Regiment 92 was then to drive the remaining 25 kilometres to Drvar in order to link up with the SS paratroop battalion and Kampfgruppe Willam.

The offensive would receive considerable air support. This would be provided by Ju 87 Stuka dive-bombers from I./Schlacht-Geschwader 2 and II./Schlacht-Geschwader 151; Heinkel He 46 and Fiat CR.42 night bombers from I./Nachtschlacht-Geschwader 7; Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighters from II./Jagd-Geschwader 51 and IV./Jagd-Geschwader 27, and Macchi C.202 fighters and Dornier Do 17 bombers from the Croatian Air Force Legion — most of them operating from airfields around Zagreb with others at Bihac and Banja Luka. The Stukas and night bombers would bomb Drvar just before the airborne landings and carry out a heavy bombing raid on Bosanski Petrovac preceding the attack. The fighters would escort the glider and parachute serials and strafe partisan positions in and around Drvar. All Luftwaffe operations were to be controlled by the Fliegerführer Kroatien (Luftwaffe Commander in Croatia), Oberst Wolter Hagen.

On May 21, OB Süd-Ost submitted the 'Rösselsprung' plan to the OKW for final endorsement. Hitler approved the plan. There were slight hesitations over the proposed strength of the airborne force, which appeared too weak, and the OKW advised that the heavy bombing raid on Bosanski Petrovac take place simultaneously with the airborne landing rather than before it.

All German commanders realised that success of the operation depended on the plan being kept totally secret. However, guarding a military secret in occupied Yugoslavia was no sinecure. For one, there

was close collaboration with the Chetnik forces; more importantly, except for the SS paratroop battalion and Grenadier-Regiment 92, all the units in the operation's order of battle were made up of soldiers with strong roots in the Balkans: the 373. (kroatische) Infanterie-Division and Kroatische Jäger-Regiment 1 and other units were made up of Croats; and the 7. SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgs-Division 'Prinz Eugen' consisted almost wholly of ethnic Germans from Serbia, Rumania and Croatia. These troops still maintained daily contacts with the locals and it was unavoidable that they would talk. In an attempt to maintain secrecy, division orders were only issued during the night of May 23/24 and the motorised units of the XV. Gebirgs-Armee Korps only moved into their jump-off positions at the last moment.

#### PLANS FOR THE AIRBORNE ATTACK

On May 19, an aerial observation aircraft from Banja Luka airfield carried out a photo reconnaissance mission to Drvar, taking numerous vertical aerials of the town and surroundings. Analysis of the photographs produced information on partisan trench systems and other defensive works in and around the town. However, the photo interpreters had difficulty identifying the actual locations of headquarters and command posts. From the presence of three anti-aircraft weapon pits near the town cemetery they deduced that this was the most likely site of Tito's command post — this then became the prime objective of the airborne attack. The presence of what looked like radio aerials near a large building at the main crossroads at the western end of town led them to identify this as the enemy HQ's communications centre — this then became the second most important objective to be captured. Tito's cave did not show up on the aerial photos and it is clear that German intelli-



gence knew nothing about it. Nor, for that matter, of the second cave near Bastasi that was Tito's daytime quarters and where he normally should have been. This lack of precise intelligence proved to be the major, and ultimately fatal, flaw in the German plan. Had they known about the cave, the Germans would no doubt have planned part of their airborne unit to land on top of the plateau above it, thus encircling the objective and cutting off any escape routes from it.

The unit assigned to carry out the raid, SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500 — the only parachute unit to be formed within the Waffen-SS — had a quite unusual personnel composition. Although it had a cadre of officers and NCOs, many of whom had earned their parachute wings as volunteers at the Luftwaffe parachute school at Stendal in 1937, the majority of the other ranks consisted of Waffen-SS soldiers on probation. It was not a Straf-Bataillon (penal battalion), in the sense that it was made up of convicted criminals, but a Bewährungs-Bataillon (probationary battalion) consisting of soldiers who had been court-martialled for grave offences against military regulations and had to serve time in special combat units in order to redeem themselves. They were no volunteers but had been induced into the unit without being given a choice. However, although relative newcomers to parachuting, many of the men were seasoned veterans with a great deal of front-line combat experience and representing all arms and services of the Waffen-SS.

Formed in September 1943 in Chlum near Prague, under the command of SS-Sturm-bannführer Herbert Gilhofer, the battalion was moved to Mataruska-Banja near Kraljevo in central Serbia for parachute training at the Luftwaffe-Fallschirm-Schule III, later transferring with the school to Papa in western Hungary. On completion of training, the battalion had a strength of 1,140 men, divided over a battalion HQ and HQ company, three rifle companies, one heavy weapons company and a replacement training company. The unit had its own motor transport, 100 trucks and 38 motorcycles.

Placed under direct command of the OKW, the battalion was deployed in anti-partisan operations in various areas of Yugoslavia, near Usice, Tuzla and in Macedonia and Montenegro. From March 18 to 31, it stood by as reserve unit during Operation 'Margarethe', the German occupation of Hungary (see *After the Battle* No. 40) and from April 26 to May 10 — by now under a new commander, SS-Hauptsturmführer Kurt Rybka — it participated in Operation 'Maibaum', a large-scale anti-partisan undertaking in southern Bosnia, but by May 20 it was back at its training-ground billets near Kraljevo.

Having been given a meagre outline of the role his battalion was to play in Operation 'Rösselsprung', Rybka began to draw up a provisional battle plan. He estimated he needed to land at least 850 men to do the job. The bottleneck here was the availability of airborne transport capability: there were not enough gliders and tugs available to air-land such a force but neither were there sufficient troop-carrying aircraft to drop the whole battalion by parachute and in a single lift. He therefore decided for a combination of glider and parachute landings, to be carried out in two waves. The first wave would bring in a total of 654 men, partly in gliders, partly by parachute: 340 men would land in DFS 230 assault gliders; 314 paratroopers would drop from Ju 52 transport planes.

The glider-borne element was split up in six combat groups, each with its own objective:

Gruppe 'Panther' (110 men in 11 gliders): to take the 'Zitadelle' (i.e. the town cemetery), the suspected site of Tito's headquarters.



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**SS-Hauptsturmführer Kurt Rybka, the commander of SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500, instructing his men at Zrenjanin airfield outside Nagy Betskersk, the departure field for the paratroopers of the first wave. This picture was probably taken on the afternoon of May 24 — 'X-Tag' minus one. Rybka delivered another send-off speech to his men immediately before take-off on the 25th but that occurred before sunrise.**

Gruppe 'Draufgänger' (70 men in seven gliders): to take the so-called 'Westkreuz', the main crossroads at the western end of the town, and capture a large building there that was suspected to be the partisans' HQ communications centre.

Gruppe 'Greifer' (40 men in four gliders): to capture 'London', the British Military Mission near the village of Prnjavor, half a kilometre south-west of Drvar.

Gruppe 'Stürmer' (50 men in five gliders): to capture 'Moskau', the Soviet Military Mission on the north-western edge of town.

Gruppe 'Brecher' (50 men in five gliders): to capture 'Amerika', the US Military Mission at the hamlet of Trninic Brijeg, one kilometre south of the town.

Gruppe 'Beisser' (20 men in two gliders): to take 'Warschau', an outpost radio position (actually the US meteorological station) two kilometres south of the town — and then assist the nearby 'Greifer' group in capturing the British Mission.

The 34 gliders were to take off from two airfields near Zagreb, 170 kilometres north-west of Drvar: Lucko and Cerklje (the Germans knew it as Zirkle). Tugs, gliders and

glider pilots were to be provided by several different glider units (ten squadrons in all):

1./Schleppgruppe 1, with five DFS 230 gliders and five Hs 126 tugs;

2./Schleppgruppe 1, with three DFS 230 gliders and three Ju 87 tugs;

II./Luftlande-Geschwader 1, with nine DFS 230 gliders and nine Ju 87 tugs;

III./Luftlande-Geschwader 1, with 17 DFS 230 gliders and 12 Hs 126 and five Avia 534 tugs.

The first wave's parachute element was to take off from Nagy Betskersk (Gross-Betschkerek, today Zrenjanin), 70 kilometres north of Belgrade and 240 kilometres north-east of Drvar, in 35 Ju 52s provided by II./Transport-Geschwader 4. This force was divided into three combat groups:

Gruppe 'Rot' (85 men) to land on a drop zone immediately south of the town, close to Gruppe 'Panther';

Gruppe 'Grün' (95 men) to land on a DZ just north of the town, between it and the Unac river;

Gruppe 'Blau' (100 men) to land on a DZ immediately east of the town, close behind the cellulose factory complex.



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**Rows of SC 50 bombs being fitted with fuses at Zulazani airfield outside Banja Luka in preparation for 'Rösselsprung'. This was the base of I./Nachtschlacht-Geschwader 7, equipped with Heinkel He 46 and Fiat CR.42 night bombers, one of the units assigned to bomb Drvar prior to the airborne landing.**

**Right:** The DFS 230 combat glider could carry a pilot and nine fully-armed men. To cover the airborne attack on Tito's headquarters, the Germans assigned no less than 13 official war correspondents. From Luftwaffe-Kriegsberichter-Zug 19 came a team of eight: Leutnant Viktor Schuller and Leutnant Hans Jochen Karnath, both photographers, were to go in with the gliders, the other six were to cover the action from one of the supporting aircraft: Leutenants Heinz Schwitzke (reporter) and Krempl (photographer) aboard a Ca 314; Leutenants Mücke (reporter) and Borgstädt (cine cameraman) aboard a Ju 87 Stuka; Feldwebel Brieke (photographer) in a He 46 and Unteroffizier Eichler (radio reporter) from a Do 17. From the SS-PK-Standarte came four men: Adolf Kunzmann (photographer) and Adalbert Callewaert (reporter) were to jump with the paratroopers and Walter Henisch (photographer) and Fritz Blume (reporter) were to go in by glider. Finally, from Luftwaffe-Kriegsberichter-Zug XI, Flieger-Korps came Leutnant Wilhelm Baitz (graphic artist), who also landed by glider.



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The three groups were to capture and occupy the town and, together with the glider-borne units, prevent any enemy attempts to break out from the encirclement. Rybka and the battalion command group (34 men) were to jump with Gruppe 'Rot', making up for the total of 314 paratroopers.

In case the initial attack by Gruppe 'Panther' did not succeed in capturing 'Zitadelle', Rybka would fire a red flare signal which meant that Gruppen 'Rot', 'Grün' and 'Stürmer' were to immediately abandon their original tasks and assemble to attack this main objective. As soon as this was taken, the battalion was to display a big sign in the form of a swastika to inform observers flying overhead of the successful outcome, and to send a similar message by wireless to rear headquarters in Zagreb and Bihac.

Three to four hours after the initial landings, the second wave would come in, consisting of 220 paratroopers and two DFS 230 gliders. The paratroops were to take off from Zaluzani airfield at Banja Luka, 90 kilometres north-east of Drvar, in 20 Ju 52s again provided by Transport-Geschwader 4. The two gliders, from II./LLG1 and taking off from Cerklje, were to bring in ammunition and supplies.

When the order for Operation 'Rösselsprung' arrived, the paratroop battalion was

still at Kraljevo, well south of its proposed take-off airfields. At 0545 on May 20, Rybka issued his first preliminary order, announcing a move to the airfields at Nagy Betskersk, Zagreb and Banja Luka. He did not disclose any details of the upcoming operation, only the name of the departure airfields. In a subsequent order, issued at 2355 that night, Rybka gave out his marching orders. The battalion was to leave in three groups, each with a different destination and travelling according to a strict time schedule. Secrecy was of the utmost importance, so the troops were instructed to travel in ordinary Waffen-SS infantry uniform, without the distinctive parachute helmets, airborne smocks or jumping boots that would give away that they were Fallschirmjäger. For the same reason, they were not to be camped on the airfields themselves but be billeted in the near surroundings. This second order still did not disclose the purpose of the upcoming operation, nor its target.

Group 1 — the paratroopers scheduled for the first wave (Battalion HQ; the 2. Kompanie minus one platoon; the 3. Kompanie, and one platoon of the 4. Kompanie) — left Kraljevo in its own trucks early on the 21st, the convoy being commanded by SS-Untersturmführer Johann Haselwanter. They motored north to Belgrade, which they

reached at noon on the 22nd, and from there took the train, travelling 70 kilometres north to Nagy Betskersk, where they were quartered in billets some eight kilometres from the airfield. Here they would be kept sealed in until the afternoon of the 24th.

The other two groups departed from Kraljevo by train transport at 1400 hours on the 21st. Group 2 — the men slated to land by glider (the 1. Kompanie and the 4. Kompanie minus one platoon) — under SS-Untersturmführer Witzemann, travelled to Zagreb, a journey of 460 kilometres, and on arrival there divided over billets near their two take-off airfields, Lucko and Cerklje.

Group 3 — the paratroopers slated for the second wave (one platoon of the 2. Kompanie and the Ersatz- und Ausbildungs-Kompanie) under SS-Hauptsturmführer Josef Obermaier, the battalion second-in-command — did not travel all the way to Zagreb but got off at Nova Gradiska, 100 kilometres north of Banja Luka. They unloaded their motor transport plus the weapons, ammunition and supplies for all the three groups. Obermaier found billets for the men in the neighbourhood; his orders were to only transfer to Zaluzani, their take-off airfield near Banja Luka, on 'X-Tag' minus one.

During the night of May 23/24, Rybka issued his operational order. Only now did



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**Left:** Final briefing before take-off. **Right:** Loading up the gliders. The pilot and the nine men sat closely packed together, one behind the other, inside the narrow fuselage. The DFS 230 C-1 had four doors, two on each side.



he disclose the operational target — Drvar — and named Tito as its objective: 'The focus of action of all units of the battalion is Tito's command staff. As soon as it is precisely known where the staff is located, all parts of the battalion that have landed near to this objective are, without hesitation and regardless, to eliminate Tito's command staff. Important personalities are if possible to be captured alive. Valuable written material is to be kept safe. Fires in the staff buildings are absolutely to be avoided so that the men of the Abwehr can secure valuable material.'

However, as this order shows, the Germans lacked one crucial piece of information: they did not know precisely where in Drvar Tito's command post was.

#### 'X-TAG' MINUS ONE

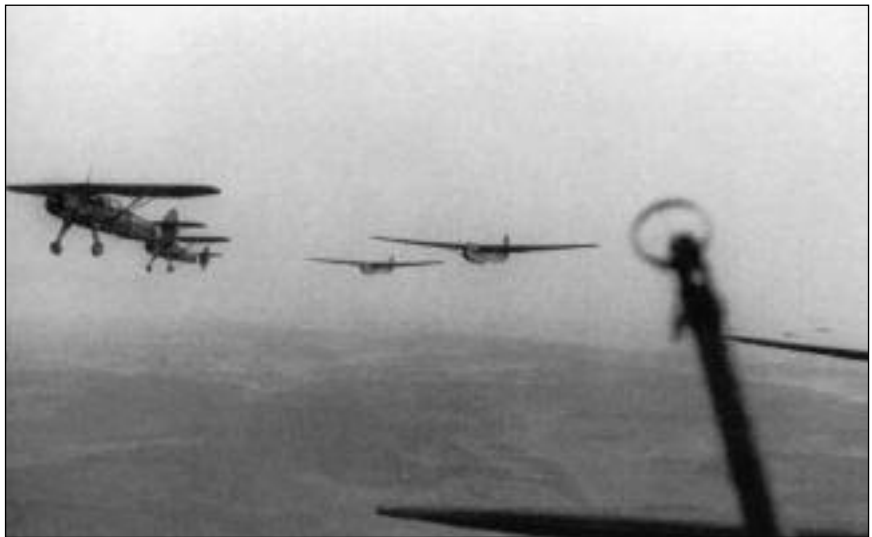
On the morning of the 24th there was a planning conference at the headquarters of the Fliegerführer Kroatien in Belgrade attended by the commanders of all the units involved: Rybka of SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500; Hauptmann Walter Dittmar of SG1, Eberhard Jahnke of II./LLG1 and Josef Karl of III./LLG1; Major Emil Herbst of II./TG4; the Chetnik and Croat commanders, etc. Using aerial photographs, the operational plan was explained and discussed and operational orders were handed out.

During the day, there arrived at the glider airfields several specialist teams that had been assigned to take part in the operation.

The largest was a detachment of 40 men from Einheit Benesch, the Brandenburger intelligence unit that had instigated the hunt for Tito. Commanded by Leutnant Gerhard Dowe, it was their task to interrogate any prisoners taken, be they partisan officers or members of the Allied military missions. Included in this team were several Chetniks with local knowledge of the Drvar area and Croats who could act as interpreters. (To safeguard security, the latter would only be told about the target and purpose of the operation during the glider flight to Drvar.)

Next was a small six-man team from Front-Aufklärungs-Trupp 216, the Abwehr counter-intelligence unit attached to 2. Panzer-Armee. Commanded by Leutnant Walter Zawadil, they were to look for and seize any important documents, codes and logbooks found at Drvar.

Also arriving were four specialist signallers from the SS-Nachrichten-Schule Metz under SS-Untersturmführer Peter Renold. They had travelled overnight from France, their special mission being to attempt to block all enemy telephone and wireless communication emanating from Drvar during the landings, thus preventing any warnings going out to partisan units in the area.



Henschel Hs 126 tugs and transport gliders approaching Drvar.

Another attachment was a Luftwaffe-Nachrichten-Verbindungs-Trupp, a small team of four Luftwaffe signallers with a wireless whose task it was to co-ordinate air-to-ground support from fighters and dive-bombers and to organise parachute re-supply drops.

Finally there arrived a team of 13 official war correspondents, eight from Luftwaffe-Kriegsberichter-Zug 19; four from the Kommando Süd-Ost of the SS-Standarte 'Kurt Eggers' (the PK unit of the SS), and one from XI. Fliegerkorps. With 'Rösselsprung' promising to be a glorious coup for Nazi propaganda, comparable to the liberation of Mussolini from the Gran Sasso, the military wanted make sure that it was well covered for the German newsreels and press. In all the team included five writers, five photographers, one cine cameraman, one graphic artist and one radio reporter.

By now Untersturmführer Witzemann, in consultation with the glider commanders, had worked out the loading tables for the 34 available gliders. A DFS 230 glider could carry a pilot and nine fully-armed men so, with the pilots taking up 34 of the 340 places in the gliders, this left room for 306 other troops. These were divided as follows: 247 men from SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500 (the entire 1. Kompanie plus the 4. Kompanie minus one Zug); 40 men from Einheit Benesch; six men from Einheit Zawadil; the four signallers from the SS-Nachrichtenschule; the four signallers from the Luftwaffe-Nachrichten-Verbindungs-Trupp, and

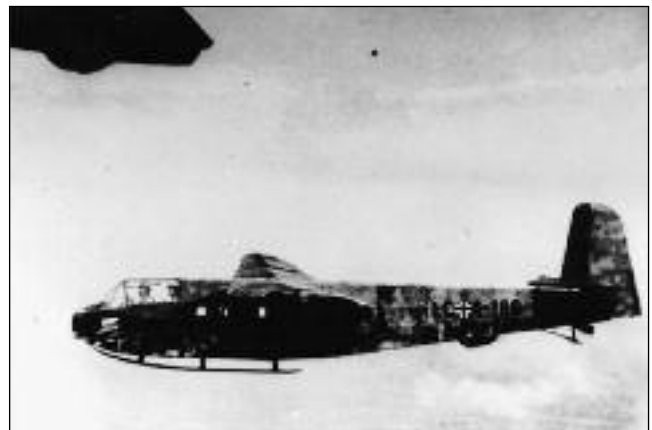
five of the 13 PK reporters (two of the 13 would parachute in; the other six would cover the operation from escorting aircraft).

That afternoon, back from the conference, the glider unit commanders briefed their tug crews and glider pilots on take-off times, flying routes, altitudes, etc. The tow aircraft and gliders were positioned on the runway during the early evening, ready to take off on the morrow. At Zrenjanin airfield, the paratroopers for the first wave packed parachutes and arms containers, loading each of the Ju 52s with four of the latter. At Nova Gradiska, the men scheduled for the second-wave jump motored 100 kilometres south to Zaluzani, their take-off airfield near Banja Luka. At 1700 hours, Hauptsturmführer Obermaier radioed Rybka a coded message that his force had reached its destination and was ready for action.

Until then, only battalion staff officers and company commanders had been in the know but now, a few hours before departure, the details of the upcoming operation were disclosed to the men. Using stereoscopic aerial photos of the attack area, every group and platoon was briefed of its specific objective and task. The men were told the principal target of the whole operation was Tito — he had to be captured, dead or alive. A portrait picture of him in field-marshal's uniform was handed around, each man having a close look so that he could recognise him. (Some historians claim each trooper on the mission was issued with a picture of Tito but this appears not to have been the case.)



Left: One of the PK photographers sitting right behind the pilot took this shot of the constricted cockpit. Right: A close-up of glider LC + 1-189. The gliders on 'Rösselsprung' came from two different units, Schleppgruppe 1 and Luftlande-Geschwader 1.



The proper identification code for these units was F7 and H4 respectively but aircraft codes on German gliders were notoriously muddled and by this time of the war few carried the correct unit code.

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SS-PK photographer Kunzmann pictured the members of his stick during the two-hour flight to Drvar. In the early phase of the war, German paratroopers jumped without arms, all their

weapons being dropped in containers released from the same aircraft on separate parachutes, but by 1944 the men jumped clutching rifles and machine pistols.

#### PARTISAN INTELLIGENCE BEFORE THE RAID

Like with the Germans, the partisans too had their intelligence apparatus and tried to fathom the enemy's intentions. Their first clue that the Germans might consider an attack on Tito's command centre came on March 27 when partisan intelligence interrogated a man called Tetaric. Originally a partisan fighter with the I Proletarian Corps, he had deserted and gone over to the Germans, but had now been captured by his former comrades. He told his interrogators that, up until mid-March, he had informed the Germans about Tito, the Escort Battalion and the strength of outpost and partisan units in the Drvar area.

Then, on May 4, a brigade of the 4th Proletarian Division during a raid on a German unit captured a document that included a sketch map of Drvar. This gave precise details of all the military and civil organisations in the town plus details about the Allied military missions, defence measures, and indications of suitable bombing targets.

That an attack by land forces was imminent seemed confirmed by other intelligence. On May 18, the partisan V Corps informed its 39th Division of German troops from Bihac moving towards the partisan airfield at Bosanski Petrovac. Three days later, the 4th Division warned its sub-units that the enemy might move from Knin and Bihac towards Drvar and Petrovac. These reports of German troop movements were cause for worry at Tito's HQ but nobody interpreted them as preparations for a large-scale concentric attack.

Finally, on May 19 partisans in Drvar spotted a single German light aircraft flying over the valley at high altitude, cruising slowly up and down for about half an hour — obviously an observation aircraft reconnoitring the area or taking aerial photographs.

These snippets of information made it likely that the Germans were planning an attack against the partisan command centre

but opinions were divided over when it would occur and what kind it would be. The possibility of a surprise airborne attack was discussed but dismissed as unlikely, mainly because parachute troops and gliders had never been used against the partisans before. Most people at Tito's headquarters expected that the attack would come in the form of an aerial attack by bombers or a ground offensive.

Nonetheless, on May 22, worried by the German observation aircraft, which he interpreted as heralding a heavy bombing raid, Lieutenant-Colonel Vivian Street, the commander of the British Mission, decided it was safer to move his men a little farther out of town. They transferred to the hamlet of Prnjavor, one kilometre south-west of Drvar, and the attached Americans to Trninic Brijeg, one kilometre east of there. The Russians stayed in place.

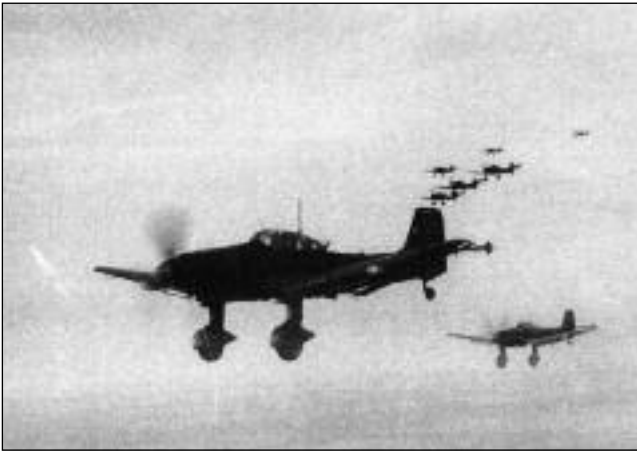
That week, Drvar enjoyed a gay and busy atmosphere. Many of the young partisans that had attended the Anti-Fascist Youth congress were still in town. Also, preparations were underway to celebrate Tito's 52nd birthday on May 25. At dusk on the 24th, as the streets of Drvar came to life, Tito came driving up to his command post from Bastasi to have a festive meal with his staff and the members of the Allied missions. Afterwards, they all sat down to watch a movie. As he was expected to be in town for the birthday celebrations next morning, Tito decided to break his usual routine and stay for the night at the Drvar cave, sleeping in the wooden cabin. Thus, it was by pure coincidence that he was present there when the airborne attack came the following morning. (Some Yugoslav historians have claimed that the Germans planned 'Rösselsprung' to coincide with Tito's birthday. This is not true, the more so since the Germans did not even know the correct date of the partisan leader's birth. An ID card in the files of the Belgrade police had it as March 12, 1892, and Italian Interior Ministry intelligence thought he was born on May 7.)

In the week before May 25, British decoders at Bletchley Park decrypted several German 'Ultra' signals relating to an operation named 'Rösselsprung', mostly from Luftwaffe sources, but none of these sufficed to build up a clear picture of what it entailed or hinted at any connection with Tito. First, on the 18th, a decrypt disclosed an order for the gliders of II./LLG1 to move from Sarajevo-Butmir to Zagreb-Zirkle on the 19th. Then, on the 21st, a signal disclosed that Stuka group I./SG2 was to move from an airfield in Rumania to Zagreb-Pleso by May 23 'for temporary employment from May 25'. That same day, another message showed German Airfield Regional Control in Zagreb ordering Banja Luka airfield to 'arrange accommodation for 200 men'. Then on the 22nd, a signal to the Fliegerführer Kroatien actually mentioned 'Rösselsprung' but without a clue to what it meant. Also that day, Jagdführer Balkan ordered the transfer of II./JG51 to Zagreb for 'a special operation' that would last for five days. Finally, on the 24th, there was a decrypt of an earlier message ordering IV./JG27 to Zagreb-Lucko by the evening of May 23 'to be at the disposal for temporary operations'.

This remained the sum of Ultra knowledge about 'Rösselsprung' but it was not enough to disclose its scope or target: no reference had been made to infantry or parachutists and there had not been a single word about Tito or the location of his headquarters. Still, even if Bletchley had figured out correctly, it would have been irrelevant for the safeguarding of 'Ultra' prevented such knowledge to be distributed to headquarters lower than armies, let alone to British Missions operating behind enemy lines. (During the Cold War, and again in the mid-1970s when the Ultra secret was unveiled, there were accusations from Communist Yugoslavia that the Allies had had advance knowledge of the raid on Drvar but had deliberately failed to warn Tito. However there is no substance to this.)



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**Left: Stuka dive-bombers from Schlacht-Geschwader 151 on their way to Drvar, pictured by PK Borgstädt. The unit's 13. Staffel, flying out from Bihac, was to bomb Target Area C (the cellulose factory and the railway station) from 0640 to 0650 and the II. Gruppe, based at Velika Gorica, Target Area D (the 'Westkreuz') from 0650 to 0655. The 13. Staffel was then to climb to 2,000 metres and provide overhead cover during the**



SMCH

**airborne landings, while the II. Gruppe was to return to base and prepare for an attack on Bosanski Petrovac from 1105 to 1110. Right: A Heinkel He 46 bomber from I./Nachtschlacht-Geschwader 7 climbing up from Drvar after dropping its bombs on Target Area A (the workshop area just east of the cellulose factory), pictured by Feldwebel Brieke. The view is to the south-east, with Drvar's main street running from left to right.**

#### 'X-TAG' (MAY 25)

In the early hours of May 25, when it was still dark, the German airborne troops closed in on the airfields. At Nagy Betskersk, the men slated for the parachute jump had reveille at 0330 and were on parade at Zrenjanin airfield an hour later, where the Ju 52s of Transport-Geschwader 4 already stood lined up on the runway. Battalion commander Rybka delivered a final encouraging speech, the men came to attention and sang the parachute song, then boarded their aircraft. Having the longest way to fly, the paratrooper aircraft already took off at 0450, well before dawn, setting course to the south-west for the two-hour flight.

At Lucko and Čerklje the men for the glider mission on arrival were divided up in groups of nine and assigned to their respective gliders, meeting up with their glider pilots. At 0555, just after first light, engines were started and, one by one, the tugs and gliders took off, the latter jettisoning their undercarriage at the end of the runway. Climbing to 10,000 feet they set course to the south-east, following the valley of the Save river, then that of the Unac river.

Meanwhile, starting at 0635, the Stukas, night-bombers and fighters had begun their attack on Drvar, releasing their bombs on pre-determined targets and machine-gunning against only slight opposition. Soon giant clouds of dust and smoke rose from the town. Among the buildings hit were the partisan telephone exchange which knocked out lines to all headquarters except that of the V Corps and the 1st Division. Meanwhile, 25 kilometres to the north-east, other bombers hit Bosanski Petrovac, knocking out the partisan airstrip there. In all, the Luftwaffe dispatched 440 sorties in support of 'Rösselsprung' that day.

At 0700 the Ju 52 troop carriers arrived from the east and began dropping their paratroopers on the three assigned landing zones north, east and south of the town. Bombs were still falling and some of the jumpers were wounded by 'friendly' shrapnel. Discarding their parachutes and collecting their heavy weapons and equipment from the canisters dropped alongside them, the men assembled and rapidly moved off towards their objectives.

Virtually simultaneous with the last parachutes coming down, the lead gliders arrived from the north-east, emerging from the valley of the Unac into the wide hill-surrounded basin in which lay Drvar. Thick smoke rose from the bombed buildings, obscuring vision for the pilots. Releasing their tow rope, the



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**At 0700 the paratroopers of the first wave began landing. This is Gruppe 'Grün' being dropped on its DZ just north of the town. The Ju 52 transport aircraft are coming in from the south-east, having followed the valley of the Unac river to reach their target. This sequence of pictures was taken by Kunzmann immediately after he himself had landed with Gruppe 'Rot' on its drop zone south of the town.**



ATB

**The same view today, the shape of the hill line and the chimneys of the cellulose factory helping Karel Margry to line up the comparison.**

glider pilots put their craft into its steep landing dive, most of them using their brake parachute to shorten their descent.

The glider force had already incurred its first losses. Ten kilometres before reaching the landing zone, the glider flown by Oberleutnant Friedrich Bredenbeck from III./LLG1, carrying the commander of the 'Beisser' assault group, SS-Obersturmführer Richard Schäfer, and eight of his men, went down for reasons unknown. It landed near Bastasi close to where a company of the Escort Battalion was guarding Tito's daytime cave and all occupants of the glider were immediately killed by concentrated partisan fire.

Three other gliders — including the second and last remaining one of Gruppe 'Beisser' — released too early, coming down in the narrow valley of the Unac between Bastasi and Drvar, five kilometres away from their intended landing points. They came to a stop close to another group of surprised partisans and a short clash with small arms and hand-grenades ensued, ending with the SS men taking about 70 prisoners. Taking these in tow, the 30 glidermen set out for Drvar on foot, which they finally reached two hours later.

The remaining 30 or so gliders landed in their allocated positions. Glider pilot Leutnant Hans Sieg from II./LLG1 carried men from Gruppe 'Panther', the team assigned to take the 'Zitadelle', the town cemetery and Tito's suspected command post. Jettisoning his brake parachute just before touching ground, his glider shot forward and came to a stop just a few metres from the cemetery wall. The men aboard threw open the doors and jumped out, storming over the wall.

However, not all landings went as well. Unteroffizier Werner Schubert, piloting another glider from Gruppe 'Panther', was fatally hit as he was making his landing dive and the glider crashed on the LZ, killing all aboard. One of the 'Stürmer' gliders nosed over on landing, also killing most of its occupants. Obergefreiter Kielmann from III./LLG1, carrying men from Gruppe 'Draufgänger', landed his glider in good order, only to be killed near it by enemy fire a few seconds later.

The partisan forces in Drvar appear to have initially been completely paralysed by the surprise enemy landings. Some men even cheered at the glider landings, thinking them



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**More sticks of Gruppe 'Grün' being dropped. The transports slowed to 150 kilometres and the troops jumped from altitudes ranging between 120 and 150 metres.**

to be aircraft shot down by their anti-aircraft weapons. However, the partisans quickly got their act together. From the hill slopes they opened fire on the landing zone, causing casualties and forcing the airborne troops to take cover.

Despite the losses incurred during the run-in and landing, the glider troops hurried off to carry out their missions. Somewhat to their dismay, the men of 'Panther' force storming the 'Zitadelle' found it was not Tito's command post but just an ordinary town cemetery on a hill. All they found nearby were some of the light anti-aircraft machine guns, abandoned by their crews during the air attacks.

The 'Draufgänger' group had landed almost on top of its objective — the buildings at the 'Westkreuz' crossroads that were suspected to be the partisan communications centre (they indeed housed a telephone exchange and several wireless stations) — and the assault went in immediately. About 20 Fallschirmjäger and the intelligence specialists

of teams Benesch and Zawadil attacked the main building. Satchel charges were placed and the doors blown in. However, inside were about 100 partisan men and women who offered fierce resistance and the Germans were forced to withdraw. Other teams from 'Draufgänger' were called and another assault was put in. The partisans fought back bravely but the Germans had established a cordon around the building and killed anyone trying to escape. Using grenades, satchel charges, armour-piercing bullets and mouse-holing techniques, the building was finally taken. However, little of intelligence value was discovered inside.

Nor did the glider troops capture any members of the Allied military missions. The British and American teams, although they had gliders landing quite close to their new quarters south of the town, managed to make good their escape. Taking their wireless set and anything else they could carry, they headed south to the hills that ringed Drvar. The Allied war correspondents were not so



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**As the last Ju 52s disappear over the horizon, the parachute troops of Gruppe 'Rot' assemble and form up for attack.**





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**The distinctive flat top of the hill on the left and the straight line of the track running halfway up the hillside link past with present.**

fortunate. All four of them were roused out of a nearby slit trench with their guide and taken prisoner. The Germans had no mercy with the families found in the houses vacated by the Anglo-Americans and they were summarily shot as 'bandit helpers'.

The gliders of the 'Stürmer' group tasked with capturing the Soviet Mission were immediately pinned down by heavy enemy fire coming from the nearby mountainside — they had in fact, quite unknowingly, landed virtually in front of Tito's cave, which was directly across the river from their landing zone. This gave the Soviet team time to escape up the slope.

However, the situation was completely different for the people in the cave. Inside, having taken cover from the bombing, were Tito, several members of his General Staff (Arso Jovanovic, Edvard Kardelj, Ivan Milutinovic, Sreten Zujovic and Aleksandar Rankovic), his two girl secretaries Zdenka Paunovic (who was also his mistress) and Olga Humo, and several others — in all 12 men and eight women. As soon as they saw the gliders landing, Zujovic and Rankovic

went out and organised some sort of defence with about 100 men from the Escort Battalion. They also sent a runner to the Officers' School three kilometres to the east and telephoned those headquarters that could still be reached — V Corps and the 1st Division — with urgent orders to come to their aid.

While one of the 'Stürmer' gliders had overturned on the landing zone in front of the cave, the occupants of the group's other four gliders quickly redeployed, launching an

**Taking comparisons in present-day Bosnia brings with it an unusual hazard, not encountered in any of our previous projects. One cruel inheritance of the grim and violent civil war that raged over former Yugoslavia in 1992-95 is the serious contamination by land mines. All combatants laid mines — an estimated two million in total — and as a result Bosnia has one of the most serious problems in the world. Since 1996 over 500 people have been killed and 1,200 wounded by mine accidents. A multi-national effort, co-ordinated by the Bosnia and Herzegovina Mine Action Centre (BHMIC), is underway to clear the mines but it will still take many years before the country is free of them. As we prepare our stories in the field, we were naturally concerned and inquired with the BHMIC in Sarajevo about the situation in Drvar. Although the town itself was reported as safe, the advice was to always tread carefully on dirt roads and in the countryside. Fortunately, once in Drvar, Karel found that the areas where he had to photograph were generally safe. Below: Looking west from the fields that once were the drop zone for Gruppe 'Rot'.**

immediate assault towards what was obviously an enemy strongpoint. Soon they had gained a position from which they kept the mouth of the cave under heavy fire.

Tito's position was precarious, for to use the ordinary way down would have meant almost certain death. One of the sentries went forward to reconnoitre but was immediately killed by a bullet in the head. Several times Zujovic and Rankovic came back to the cave to talk Tito into getting out but he would not go. His mistress Zdenka had fallen into hysterics and kept pulling at him bawling 'They'll kill us! They'll kill us!'

Meanwhile, the various parachute detachments were carrying out their missions. Groups 'Blau' and 'Grün' first secured the railway station and the rail and road bridges over the Unac at the eastern of town, then advanced on the town centre. Moving through the empty streets on the double, the SS men met only minimal resistance, the only opposition coming from lightly-armed headquarters personnel, delegates from the youth congress and civilians.

The District Committee of the Communist Youth League of Yugoslavia, consisting of three young men and three girls, was surrounded in its office building along the main street in the centre of town. They refused the German appeals for surrender and fought to the last round, returning German hand-grenades through the window. They battled until the last one fell.

By 0900, the Fallschirmjäger had all of Drvar under control. They had taken some 200 partisans prisoner and captured considerable amounts of weapons and equipment. The 200 or so civilians that remained in the town — men, women and children — were also rounded up, being herded together in the cellulose factory, the Dom Kulture (cultural assembly hall) beside the Serbian an



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Immediately in the wake of the paratroopers, the glider force arrived, all the aircraft being fitted with parachute brakes to shorten their landings.

Orthodox church on main street and in several other places. However, despite a frantic door-to-door search and brutal interrogation of prisoners by the Serbian-speaking members of Einheit Benesch, the Germans failed to find Tito or any of his staff. All they captured was one of his field-marshal's uniforms (which they found at a tailor's shop in the town) and his Jeep.

The Abwehr interrogators tried to sift out partisans from civilians but it was difficult to tell the difference and the Germans had little mercy. Many of the prisoners were questioned and then summarily shot. The Germans also shot all patients found in the Drvar hospital. Buildings holding partisan stores of arms or supplies were set on fire.

By now, Rybka had set up his battalion headquarters in the cemetery. Located on high ground overlooking the town (locally known as Sobica Glavica) it was an ideal place to oversee the battle. The battalion radio was set up here and the heavy company's four 8cm mortars were dug in just outside. The battalion first aid post was established in the south-west corner of the cemetery, where the low stone wall gave some cover. The captured war correspondents and some other prisoners were brought here too. During the subsequent fighting, their captors would force them to carry ammunition and carry wounded troopers to the aid post.

While groups 'Panther' and 'Rot' were consolidating on the cemetery there was quite a bit of fighting going on at the northern end of town, near where 'Stürmer' had landed. From the intense volume of fire com-



Exiting from his glider, PK Henisch immediately turned around to picture other men clearing the aircraft. The man on the left is holding an MG 42 light machine gun.



Not far away, PK Karnath pictured the machine gun teams from another rifle squad emerging from his glider. The No. 2 men carry extra ammo belts and spare barrels.

ing from a cleft in the mountainside, Rybka deduced that this was probably where Tito had his command post and that an assault must be put in. He shot up his flare calling in all forces from groups 'Rot', 'Grün' and 'Stürmer'. They reformed in the town, orders were given, and soon the force — about 200 strong — was attacking in fire and movement

across the kill zone in front of the cave. In order to reach the cave, the troops had either to wade across the Unac river or use one of the bridges at either end of town. However, there was little cover and the intensity of enemy small-arms fire emanating from above and around the cave was so great that the assault soon faltered.



Left: Most of the gliders landed safely and without problems. These two — [1] and [2] on the aerial photo *opposite* — belong to Gruppe 'Panther', the force assigned to take the 'Zitadelle'. Right: The 'Zitadelle' (the town cemetery) lies on high ground

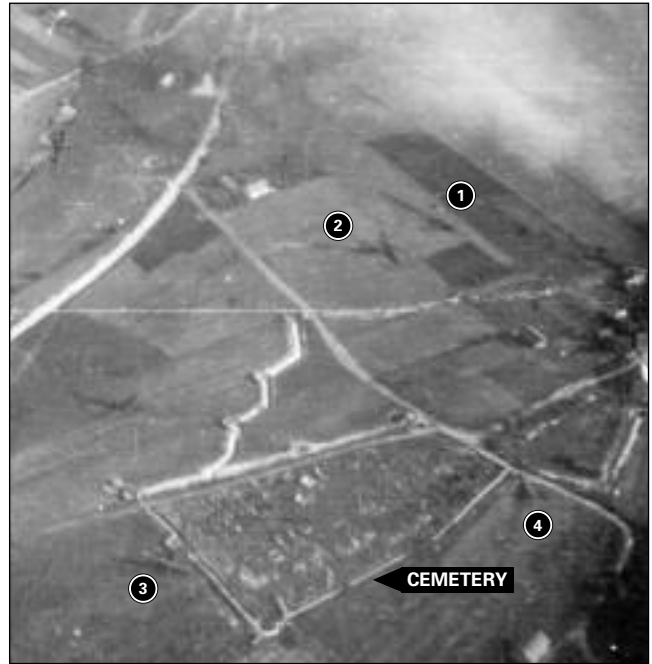


just south of the town known as Sobica Glavica, and the picture was actually taken right beside it, looking north-west towards the 'Westkreuz'. Today much of the ground sloping down from the hill has been developed with new housing.





Leutnant Hans Sieg, a glider pilot from the 8. Staffel of II./LLG1 flying another of the 'Panther' gliders, made a perfect landing, coming to a stop almost against the 'Zitadelle', enabling his passengers to immediately storm the objective. His glider [3] can be seen on the oblique aerial (right) taken by a reconnaissance aircraft later that morning. The day after the battle, Sieg had himself photographed with his aircraft (above).



HELMUTH SCHULTZ



SMICH

Left: A second glider [4] came to a stop virtually against the wall of the cemetery, breaking its starboard wing. This picture of it was taken the following day, shortly after the link-up with the ground forces, as evidenced by the Fieseler Storch light aircraft taking off from the landing zone in the background evacuating casualties. Note the anti-aircraft machine gun set up just inside the cemetery. This is one of the three AA



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machine guns from the partisans' Escort Battalion that were captured by the Fallschirmjäger on Sobica Glavica in the first minutes of the landing. The Germans moved it from its weapon pit nearby to this spot in order to reinforce their perimeter defence around the cemetery. Right: The same north-east corner of the cemetery, pictured by Karel Margry seven decades later.



SMICH

Left: A group of Fallschirmjäger cautiously moving along the outer wall of the cemetery. The men on the right appear to be setting up a mortar. The wing tip of the glider that landed in



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this corner can just be seen on the extreme right. Right: The same piece of wall today, slowly crumbling under the passage of time.



**Right: Another one of the 'Panther' gliders came down in a wheat field below the cemetery.**

To make matters worse for the Germans, the partisans began counter-attacking their flanks and rear. The first counter-stroke began as early as 0800 and was carried out from the east by the pupils of the Officers' Training School. That morning the cadets, some 130 in number, were conducting out-doors training. Immediately upon realising the nature of the attack, even before the runner sent to alert them had arrived, they marched off to the sound of gunfire. Armed only with pistols and rifles, they split into two groups. The smaller one crossed to the north side of the Unac and advanced west along the railway line towards Tito's cave. The larger group, their armoury augmented by the retrieval of several mis-landed German arms containers, attacked Gruppen 'Blau' and 'Grün' in the eastern part of town, driving them away from the eastern bridges and fixing them in place. Although the officer cadets suffered casualties, they would maintain pressure on this flank throughout the day.

Sometime during the morning, two of the CV-35 light tanks from the partisans' tank platoon (the third had a mechanical breakdown) came driving into town from the south-east, penetrating the German lines as far as the church on main street. The Fallschirmjäger's initial reaction was to drive them off with one of the four flame-throwers that had been flown in with the gliders but, as

**Right: The line of the road to Bosanski Petrovac climbing out of Drvar on the hillside in the background helps to identify the spot where the glider ended up. The view is north-west.**



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these were being made ready, it turned out that they had been damaged in the landing and could not be used. SS-Oberscharführer Walter Hümmel thereupon took off his camouflage smock, sprinted out to the rearmost tank and put the jacket over its vision slit, thus blinding the driver. The partisan tank crew reacted by turning the vehicle sideways and then jerking it back and forth against the houses lining the street, thus throwing off Hümmel. Next, the tank commander opened his hatch and fired a pistol shot at Hümmel lying outstretched in the street, grazing his head. At this, both tanks raced off and escaped out of town to the west. (There exists another version of this same incident. According to partisan accounts, a local girl that had been taken prisoner and was standing nearby, 16-year-old Mika Bosnic, on seeing Hümmel blind the tank, rushed out to the

**Left: Obergefreiter Kielmann from III./LLG1, carrying men from Gruppe 'Draufgänger', landed his glider in good order, only to be killed near it by enemy fire a few seconds later.**

**Right: As recorded in the battalion after-action report, two of the 34 gliders crashed on the landing zone, killing all aboard. This is one of them. From its upside-down position, it could well be the glider from Gruppe 'Stürmer' that nosed over right in front of Tito's cave but the terrain in the background would appear to rule that out. In actual fact this is the glider from Gruppe 'Panther' flown by Unteroffizier Werner Schubert, who was fatally hit by fire from one of the partisans' anti-aircraft machine guns as he was making his landing dive. This prevented him from deploying the brake parachute, causing the glider to crash on the landing zone, killing everyone inside.**



ZNACI BIBLIOTEKA

**Right:** All seven gliders of Gruppe 'Draufgänger' landed in good order in the fields north-west of the 'Westkreuz', the main crossroads at the western end of Drvar. The houses seen in the background along the road from that crossroads (off the picture to the right) to the bridge over the Unac river (off the picture to the left).



KUNZMANN

vehicle and tore away the blinding piece of clothing, only to be mowed down and killed by fire from the SS soldiers.)

Having been alerted by telephone of the surprise airborne raid, the headquarters of the I Proletarian Corps radioed the command post of the 6th Lika Division (Colonel Doko Jovanic) at 0800, ordering it to launch an immediate counter-attack. The division's 3rd Lika Brigade (Major Milan Sijan) had its four battalions spread out in the wooded hills between Kamenica and Resanovci, south-west of Drvar and six to 15 kilometres distant. Each battalion was about 240 men strong. They were lightly armed but extremely familiar with the terrain and local inhabitants. They immediately mobilised and began a route march to engage the Germans. The lead unit, the 3rd Battalion, arrived on the scene at 1100, just as the Germans were attacking the cave. They swung around to the west to hit the enemy in the flank; the 1st Battalion, which joined the fray at 1130, attacked directly towards the German position at the cemetery; and the 2nd Battalion,

which arrived at 1200, veered right to attack the 50 men of Gruppe 'Brecher' in Trninic Brijeg. Moving close quickly to avoid German air attacks, the partisans attacked on the run, charging with hand-grenades.

To meet this new threat, Rybka had to re-deploy one battle group, the more so since he needed to secure the drop zone for the second wave. Several paratrooper squads, armed with MG 42 machine guns, moved out

through the wheat fields toward the south and south-west. Backed up by the battalion's four 8cm mortars and four parachute-dropped 7.5cm recoilless light artillery guns, they tried to attack up the wooded hillsides but soon found all they could accomplish was to set up defensive outposts at the base of the hills. (War correspondent Pribichevich was forced to carry ammo for one such squad together with two other prisoners. Later that



ILLUSTRIRTER BEOBACHTER

**Left:** The task of 'Draufgänger' was to capture the buildings around the 'Westkreuz' that were suspected to be the partisans' HQ communications centre. In actual fact they housed various wireless stations, the telephone exchange, a Morse-code school and local and regional command posts. The buildings were fiercely defended by about 100 partisans and ultimately taken by



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a storm assault using grenades and satchel charges. This is how the building on the north-west corner of the crossroads looked after the battle. The picture's low quality is caused by it having been reproduced from the *Illustrierter Beobachter* newspaper of June 29, 1944. **Right:** The building was pulled down after the war and today a supermarket takes its place.



SMCH

The arms and equipment found inside were collected in the yard beside the building.



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There is little to link past with present in what is today the supermarket's car park.



**Right: Another centre of resistance was this house on the town's main street. It was the office of the District Committee of the Communist Youth League of Yugoslavia and was defended by six young partisans — three men, Dusko Bursac, Ljubo Bosnic and Dusko Bajic, and three girls, Zora Zejkovic, Raza Omanovic and Savica Solomun — who fought to the last round, throwing back German hand-grenades and refusing all appeals for surrender until the last of them fell. Naturally, they became revered heroes of the partisan revolution in post-war Communist Yugoslavia. Unfortunately the historic building on what is today Ulica Titova (Tito Street) was gutted by a fire in July 2012 and today stands boarded up.**

afternoon, when a partisan attack forced the German squad to withdraw in some confusion, he managed to escape and re-join the partisans.)

The SS battalion was now engaged on all sides in fierce combat against increasing enemy forces, trying to attack the cave and fend off counter-attacks on the flanks and rear all at the same time. Fighters and fighter-bombers provided support throughout the day, their actions directed by the ground-to-air radio operated by the attached Luftwaffe signallers, who also relayed messages to Fliegerführer Kroatien HQ in Zagreb via a reconnaissance aircraft flying overhead.

At 1100 hours, realising he was not strong enough, Rybka halted the attack on the cave and withdrew the assaulting troops to the safety of the houses at the northern edge of town. He decided that he needed his second wave of paratroopers, due to arrive at noon, before any assault could continue.

During this lull in the fighting, around 1115 hours, Tito and the rest of his party managed to make their escape from the cave. Strangely enough there are two different versions of how they got out. One claims that they discovered an opening through the cave ceiling, a natural cleft worn out by water. With the aid of a rope they made their way up this channel (even Tito's Alsatian dog Tiger was tied to a rope and pulled up) and emerged on the plateau above, where they found Aleksandar Rankovic and a group of partisans from the Escort Battalion holding off the Germans.

The other version (confirmed by Tito in 1974) says that they cut a hole in the floor of the wooden cabin and lowered themselves down a rope into the dry streambed below. They then clambered along the bedrock until they spotted a garden of plum trees and there climbed up the slope to the plateau above to join Rankovic's group. (Although this version is the most prolific, it seems rather improbable because lowering into the narrow ravine would still give them no safe exit from its fire-swept mouth.)

Whatever their escape route, the party, now about 80 strong and including the Soviet Mission, managed to make their way through the woods to the town of Potoci, 20 kilometres to the east, where the partisans had a few huts sheltered by trees. In the late afternoon the British Mission under Lieutenant-Colonel Street rejoined them there and, using their wireless, sent a message to Allied HQ in Bari asking urgently for air support. (As a result, between May 26 and June 1, bombers and fighters of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces from Italy flew over 1,000 sorties to aid the partisans, bombing German supply centres and troop concentrations and attacking the German columns converging on Drvar.)

From Potoci, the group — Tito and his staff, the Allied Missions and a force of a few

**Right: Karel was elated to find the same houses still standing along the south side of Ulica Titova, the one on the right being No. 20.**



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**Fallschirmjäger moving west along main street with a wheeled supply container in tow. Parachute canisters weighed up to 100 kilos and could be loaded with mortars, ammunition, explosives, wireless sets or medical supplies. These men are hauling ammunition for the battalion's heavy machine guns.**



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A little further up the street, Kunzmann pictured two men from Gruppe 'Stürmer' taking cover behind a stone post near the Serbian Orthodox Church.



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The post originally was part of the fence surrounding the garden of the Dom Kulture (cultural assembly hall and cinema). The church makes for an easy comparison.



BORAC

Above: More Fallschirmjäger approach the church, coming down the slope from the drop zone. The Dom Kulture, also known as the Sokol building, is on the right. Right: Shortly after, a machine gun has been set up under the church colonnade, aimed to cover the western bridge over the Unac river. The man in the Luftwaffe uniform on the extreme right is carrying a camera, so he is probably one of the Luftwaffe PK photographers, most probably Karnath.



MICHAELIS

hundred partisans — was able to take a train along a little line through the woods. For several nights, they were almost constantly on the move trying to evade the German forces, who were combing the district with air support. Again and again they had narrow escapes. They were short of food and ammunition but managed to stay long enough in one place to arrange and receive a parachute drop of RAF supplies. Throughout, Tito kept calm, issuing orders to his small group and to partisan formations in the neighbourhood but it was rapidly becoming clear that, with only one wireless, it was impossible for him to direct operations of his forces throughout Yugoslavia while being chased through the woods.

It was General Korneyev of the Russian Mission who first raised the matter of departure by air. He wanted his mission to be lifted out, and suggested that Tito come along. The latter was concerned about the damaging

Right: A timeless comparison. The yellow house in the background is the old Dom Kulture.



ATB

KARNATH 2610-36



**Left:** The combat photographer seen in the previous picture at the church colonnade was almost certainly Karnath as he took this picture of two captured partisans being hustled to a



**prisoner collection point across the green in front of the church. Right:** The house in the background still stands along Ulica Titova.

ATB

effect on partisan morale were he to abandon Yugoslavian soil, even if only for a brief period. Tito hesitated for a further three

days, then at last asked Colonel Street to arrange evacuation of himself and his staff by air to Italy. A signal was dispatched to Bari

and during the night of June 3/4 a C-47 (from a Soviet transport squadron operating from Bari under British control) landed on an

ILLUSTRIERTER BEOBACHTER



**Above and below:** Prisoners included a mixed bag of men, women and children, some in uniform, some not. It was difficult for the Germans to sort out the partisan fighters from the non-combatants, but it did not really matter to them for any civilian found in a locality occupied by partisans was considered a franc-tireur or 'bandit helper'. The rules of war as defined by the Geneva Convention meant little in the Balkans. In August 1942 the OKW had issued Directive No. 46 which authorised German soldiers to shoot anyone who supported the partisans or allowed them into their homes. A later directive stipulated that no German employed in war against partisan bands could be made responsible for his actions in court. Consequently, the treatment of those captured at Drvar was brutal, and interrogations to find out where Tito was hiding were carried out at gunpoint.

KUNZMANN



HEINISCH

**Among the prisoners was this young woman in battledress. She has been identified as Gospe Talic, a 17-year-old partisan who was in Drvar to follow a course in Morse-code telegraphy. Her interrogators are not Fallschirmjäger as they are wearing ordinary Wehrmacht helmets. They are in fact Serb-speaking Croat members of the Abwehr teams attached to the airborne force for the operation, either Einheit Benesch or Einheit Zawadil. Talic later managed to escape her captors. (After the war she became somewhat a celebrity heroine in Tito's Communist Yugoslavia. She died in 1977, aged 50, and today lies buried at Debeljaca Cemetery in Bihac.)**



ZNACI BIBLIOTEKA



ZNACI BIBLIOTEKA

A prize catch for the Germans was the capture of the four Allied war correspondents: (L-R) John Talbot, AFPU Sergeant Max Slade, Stoyan Pribichevich and Chief Petty Officer Gene Fowler.

The Germans initially threatened to shoot them but this order was soon rescinded and the four men were taken to battalion headquarters in the cemetery, where this picture was taken.

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Above: The wall lining the eastern side of the cemetery allows us to pinpoint the spot. Today this corner is filled with new tombs and graves. Right: PK Karnath pictured a dejected-looking Pribichevich and Fowler. Pribichevich managed to escape later in the day, the others would spend the rest of the war in POW camps.



KARNATH 2611-15

ZNACI BIBLIOTEKA



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Many of the prisoners, irrespective of whether they were partisans or ordinary civilians, were summarily executed by the Germans.





KARNATH 2619-28

The Germans failed to capture Tito — the prime target of the whole operation — but they did find his new field-marshal's uniform in a tailor shop in the town. Karnath pictured the Fallschirmjäger posing with their trophy, but when compared with the pictures of Tito taken on May 14 (see pages 2 and 5), this is a different uniform.

improvised airstrip at Kupresko Polje near Mliniste and picked up Tito, Zdenka, his dog, half a dozen of his staff, Colonel Street and the Soviet Mission, and flew them to Bari. The Soviet transport returned that same night with three C-47s from the US 60th Troop Carrier Group to evacuate a further 74 persons, including the rest of Tito's staff and the remainder of the Allied missions. In addition, over the following two

nights the Americans flew out 118 partisan wounded, the last C-47 taking off just a few hours before the Germans captured the field.

For a few days Tito stayed in a villa in Bari where he discussed future support of the partisans with Air Marshal Sir John Slessor, the deputy commander of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, and with Brigadier Maclean. On the night of June 8/9 Royal Navy destroyer HMS *Blackmore* brought

Tito and his staff to the Dalmatian island of Vis, a secure Allied base just off the coast of Yugoslavia, from where he continued to direct his war until the liberation of Belgrade in October.

All this was of course not known to Rybka and his battalion as they recuperated from their initial assault on the cave, staved off the growing partisan counter-attacks and waited for the expected reinforcements.



SMICH

The Germans also failed to capture the Allied Military Missions attached to Tito's headquarters. The British and Americans managed to flee in the nick of time and the Soviets were able to join the defenders of Tito's cave. To offset their disappointment, the Fallschirmjäger posed with the British and American flags they had found in the town.



ZNACI BIBLIOTEKA

Above: They also captured Tito's Jeep. This was a gift from the Americans and had been transported to the partisans in a Waco glider from Italy. Below: The Germans were also fascinated with the three 'Wellbikes' they captured. These single-seat 98cc single-cylinder motorcycles, especially developed for the Special Operations Executive, fitted in parachute containers and had been air-dropped to the British Mission by the RAF.



DIE SÜDOST-ILLUSTRIERTE



ATB

Karel found that the building behind the soldiers no longer exists although the house with the sloping roof remained to help him identify the spot. The house seen on the extreme left is also still standing, albeit hidden in his comparison by the new Post Office that now occupies the corner of Ulica Titova and Ulica 13. Maj.





KARNATH 2610-20

With the town in their hands, the Germans concentrated their attacks on a partisan stronghold holding out north of the Unac. Judging by the amount of fire coming from around a cave there, they rightly guessed that this was the site of Tito's

command post. Karnath pictured a group of Fallschirmjäger engaging the enemy with automatic weapons. The man with the camera on the left must be one of the SS-PK photographers, either Adolf Kunzmann or Walter Henisch.



HENISCH

Left: This looks like the same attack group, just seen from a different angle. Right: The first partisan counter-attack was launched by the 130 cadets of the Officers' School, who immediately marched towards the sound of battle to attack the



ATB

Germans in the flank. The building that housed the school still survives at the hamlet of Zavade (Sipovljani), three kilometres south-east of Drvar. No longer in use, it stands abandoned to the elements.



ATB



ATB

All German attempts to reach the cave faltered at the bridge over the Unac (left) or while wading the river (right).





SMCH

**Just before noon, five hours after the initial landing and one hour late, the second wave of paratroopers arrived comprising 220 men jumping on a landing zone south of the cemetery. The 20 Ju 52s carrying them came in from the south and the various PK photographers, most of them by now concentrated**

**at the battalion command post on cemetery hill, had a grandstand view of the drop. It occurred just as partisan fighters from the 3rd (Lika) Brigade were launching counter-attacks from the south and west, and the paratroops came down under withering fire from the surrounding hills.**

Shortly before noon, at 1150, the second wave arrived. Having taken off from Banja Luka, 85 kilometres to the north-east, but coming in from the south, 20 Ju 52s released 220 paratroopers on a drop zone immediately south of the cemetery. Two gliders from II./LLG1 landed alongside, bringing in

urgently-needed ammunition. The paratroopers were met by concentrated partisan fire and suffered heavy casualties. One of those killed was the force commander, battalion second-in-command Hauptsturmführer Obermaier. The two gliders crash-landed on the zone and the wrecks were

covered by such intense partisan fire that it was impossible to retrieve any supplies from them. Prisoners were again used to clear the zone. The new arrivals were immediately committed against the south-west ridge as well, advancing halfway up the slope before being stopped by well dug-in partisan forces.



ATB

**The spectacle of war and sounds of battle are gone, leaving just a peaceful valley in Bosnia.**



KARNATH 2611-22

**Above:** Standing near Leutnant Sieg's glider close by the cemetery, Karnath pictured the sticks landing under fire. Post-war analysts of Operation 'Rösselsprung' have criticised battalion commander Rybka for letting the second wave drop on its original pre-planned drop zone instead of ordering a change to a new and better DZ. Having discovered that Tito's command post was not in the cemetery but probably in the escarpment just north of the town, they argue that he should have radioed orders to have the second wave jump on the plateau above Tito's cave, thus cutting off the partisan leader's route of escape.

Now reinforced, Rybka planned a renewal of the assault on the cave. The battalion mortars on cemetery hill were ordered to concentrate their fire on the target and the heavy machine guns teams instructed to establish a firebase to support the assault infantry across the open terrain. Determined to ensure success, Rybka decided to take part in the assault himself.



ATB



Men from the first wave watch from behind the shelter of the cemetery wall as their comrades descend.



Today young trees mask the view of the valley from this spot but the cemetery wall helps to line up the match.

ATB





One of the paratroopers lands next to the radio mast which the German battalion signallers have erected outside the cemetery.



Since the war new houses have been built on the south-western slope of Sobica Glavica.



The last of the paratroopers landed well beyond the DZ. They were pictured by PK Schuller from a shallow trench immediately south-west of the cemetery. This was where the battalion

command group had set up, and where the signal and supply sections were operating, hence the large number of equipment canisters in this area.

The attack started at 1400 hours. However, by now partisan defence was even stronger than in the morning and it got nowhere. The closest any of the Germans got to the cave was a lone Fallschirmjäger who made it to 30 metres from its mouth before he was forced to retreat.

Close combat continued into the afternoon, with heavy casualties among the Fallschirmjäger. The fighting was bitter and uncompromising, with neither side giving any mercy. Wounded were left where they fell and their weapons were taken. The partisans fought with a savagery that equalled that of their opponents. Some of the German dead were later found mutilated, with ears and noses cut off, Red Stars carved in their foreheads or lengths of explosive cord tied around their limbs to blow them off.

*Right:* Karel could find no trace of the trench in the area surrounding the cemetery but fortunately the hills in the background to the north-west helped to identify its position.





Busy at work in this trench was the Luftwaffe-Nachrichten-Verbindungs-Trupp, a small team of four Luftwaffe signallers attached to the battalion to co-ordinate air-to-ground support. Equipped with a 20-watt wireless transmitter, they had been flown in by glider and throughout the operation called in fighter-bombers flying overhead, directing them to enemy targets. They were also in contact with a reconnaissance aircraft circling above, which relayed messages back to headquarters of the Fliegerführer Kroatien in Zagreb, enabling them to organise supply drops by the Ju 52s.

By now, taking care of the many wounded in the medical aid post in the cemetery was severely overtaxing the two battalion doctors, SS-Obersturmführer Erwin von Helmersen and SS-Untersturmführer Dr Hermann.

At 1500 hours Rybka had his signallers radio a message to rear headquarters in Bihac: 'Are lying in completely exposed position. Care of wounded insufficient. Enemy amassing strong forces.'

By 1800 it was clear that the attempt to reach the cave had failed and Rybka ordered the battalion to retreat. During the withdrawal Rybka was gravely wounded by a partisan hand-grenade. A few men ventured out and carried him out of the firing lines.

With the battalion commander out of action, his second-in-command killed and the adjutant, SS-Obersturmführer Otto Mertely, gravely wounded too, command of the battalion was getting a problem. Being the senior officer present, one of the glider pilots, Hauptmann Otto Bentrup from III./LLG1, assumed command of the unit.

By now, the German situation was getting decidedly precarious. The battalion was dangerously spread out and completely surrounded by superior and aggressive enemy forces. All chances of achieving its primary mission were gone. Casualties had been heavy and ammunition was running low. The men were thirsty, hungry and tired. There was still no sign of Kampfgruppe Willam or any other relieving force. Faced with this rather hopeless situation, Hauptmann Bentrup decided to concentrate his force in a tight perimeter, and there await relief by the ground forces. The most suitable place for such a defensive position would be cellulose factory at the eastern end of town but, realising that his force was too depleted to hold such a large complex, Bentrup decided to dig in on the high ground around the cemetery.

Runners were sent out to all groups with orders to rally at the 'Zitadelle'. Outlying units were ordered back by means of flare signals. With the partisan pressure mounting, a fighting withdrawal had to be made. One by one, the SS platoons disengaged and withdrew to the rendezvous, some in good order, some more confused. One paratrooper section, defending a farmhouse one kilometre to the south-west, was cut off and annihilated by the partisans.

By 2030, the entire battalion had concentrated at the cemetery. A rectangle not larger than 50 by 80 metres, the graveyard sloped down to the east in a series of low terraces. A 1.5-metre-high stone wall enclosed the cemetery on its lower eastern side, offering the defenders protection and cover, but the other three sides were completely open. Here the SS men occupied a continuous trench line. Part of this trench already existed from before the landings, other sections had been dug during the day by POWs pressed into labour. Now the Fallschirmjäger dug to deepen the shallow trench, sheltering shoulder to shoulder and placing their rifles and machine guns on the parapet, while those positioned inside the cemetery dug in as deep as possible among the crosses and



Nearby in the same trench were SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500's own signallers. Their radio was a heavier 80-watt transmitter with which they could establish contact with rear and higher headquarters, notably that of the XV. Gebirgs-Korps in Bihac. However, it did not work well and the operators had difficulty exchanging call-signs with their colleagues, so communication was haphazard. Even worse, the transmitter was knocked out by a direct mortar hit in the evening, severing all links with the rear and leaving the battalion in the dark about the progress of the relieving ground forces.



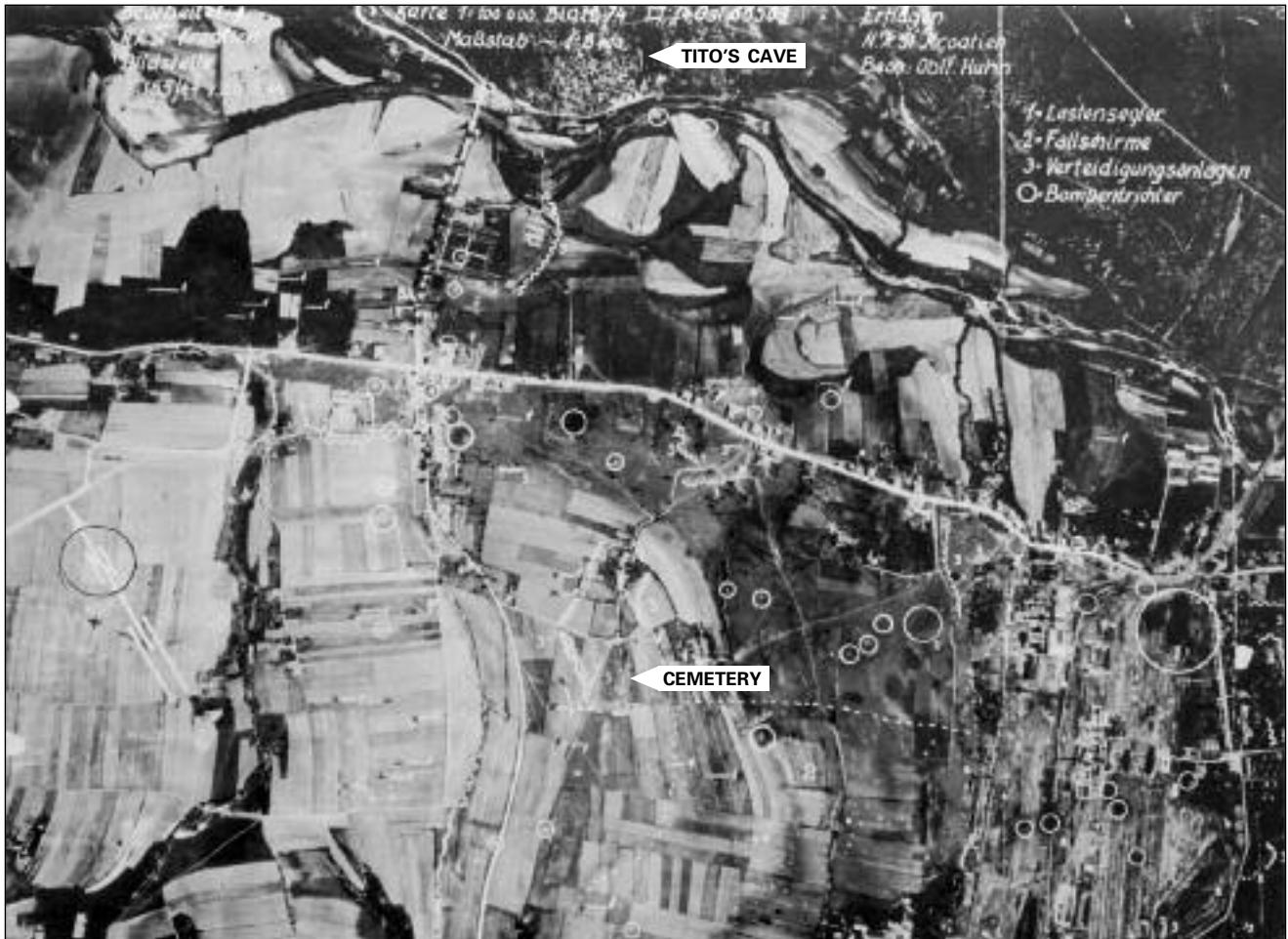
Standing upright in the trench in the background of the picture on the left is SS-Obersturmführer Otto Mertely, the one-eyed battalion adjutant. He is seen here giving instructions to a runner. Later in the day he would be seriously wounded.

headstones, some men opening tombs to serve as ready-made bunkers. From their hilltop position, the defenders had a clear view of the surrounding terrain, at least during daylight.

During the twilight hours, partisan mortars began targeting the cemetery, the start of a bombardment that would continue into the night with increasing ferocity. The rain of mortar bombs killed 15 to 20 men, including several of the wounded in the medical aid post. A direct mortar hit destroyed the battalion radio, cutting all wireless links with rear headquarters or relieving forces.

As darkness approached, German air support faltered and the partisans moved in from the surrounding hills for the kill. At 2100, the 3rd Lika Brigade attacked with

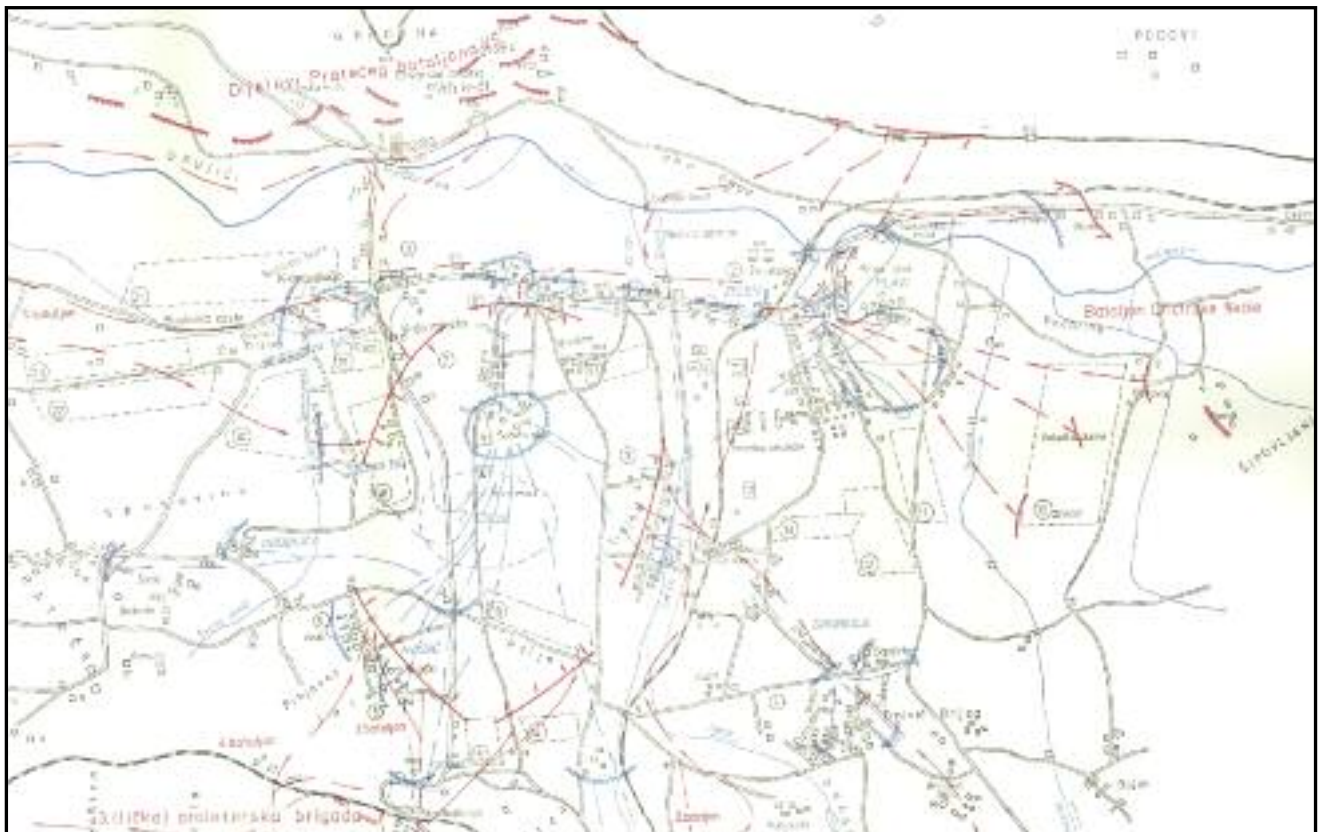




HELMUTH SCHULTZ

Above: That afternoon, a reconnaissance aircraft from Nah-Aufklärungs-Staffel Kroatien took this vertical aerial of Drvar and the surrounding area. The tiny annotations added by the photo-interpreters identify gliders [1], parachutes [2], defence field-

works [3] and bomb craters (circled). Tito's cave had still not been identified by them. Below: The map shows a wider area to illustrate the counter-attacks that were launched by the 3rd (Lika) Brigade from the south and west that afternoon.



ODIC DESANTNA DRVAR





ILLUSTRIRTER BEOBACHTER

**Above: By evening, with the partisans growing stronger and more aggressive by the minute, the Germans withdrew into a tight perimeter centred on the cemetery, planning to dig in and await relief. On the western side of the cemetery they occupied a trench that gave them good observation of the sloping ground over which the partisans had to advance if they were to close in.**

three of its four battalions in an enveloping assault. The 1st Battalion attacked from the south, the 2nd from the south-east and the 3rd from the north-west. Bullets whistled from every direction and tracers criss-crossed the valley. The Germans fought back with all their weapons, holding on to their position and preventing breaches. Some of the lightly wounded helped out the fighting men, frantically filling machine-pistol magazines and preparing machine-gun ammunition belts for them. After every partisan assault, those manning the outer trench were relieved by men from inside the cemetery.



ZNACI BIBLIOTEKA

**Above: It is not always clear whether the men lying outstretched behind the trenches have been killed or are just asleep. Note the trooper with the head wound still occupying the front-line trench. The two gliders seen lying in the fields below the German positions are the same pair as can be seen in the photograph on page 16.**

At 2130, the partisan battalions were running out of ammunition so a decision was taken to commit the 3rd Brigade's 4th Battalion, which so far had been held in reserve. Coming in from Kamenica in the south-west, it inserted between the 1st Battalion in the south and the 3rd Battalion in the west. Shortly after, yet another fresh unit was deployed, the 1st Battalion of the 1st Lika Brigade, also from the 6th Division. Having been sent to Drvar from Cvjetic, 17 kilometres to the north-west, at 1600 hours

**Left: The view of the Unac valley is masked by new housing but this is the same sight, looking north-west.**



ATB





LKZ19

**On the eastern side of the perimeter, the troopers were able to find some protection behind the stone wall that ran the length of the cemetery there. From it, they had a clear view all the way to the cellulose factory in the distance.**

that afternoon, it took over the northern sector of the line, relieving the men of the Escort Battalion and Officers' School who had borne the heat of battle since early morning. By 2300 the single SS battalion was completely surrounded by no less than five partisan battalions. The mere number of units slightly distorts the picture — the depleted German battalion was now down to perhaps 700 effectives, the five partisan battalions added up to some 1,000 men — but it was clear the partisans had gained the upper hand.

**Right: Houses and sheds still occupy the area below the cemetery today although by the looks of it not the same ones that were there in 1944.**



ATB



KUNZMANN

**The men inside the cemetery had to dig in among the graves and tombs.**



ATB

**Scouring the various terraces of the cemetery, Karel found the same stone cross still standing.**





KUNZMANN

By now, there were several dozen wounded men in the battalion first aid post, and the two doctors and medical orderlies had a tough job keeping up with the seemingly endless flow of new casualties. Curiously, one of the battalion doctors, SS-Obersturmführer Erwin von Helmersen, had previously served as camp doctor in Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, where he reputedly participated in selections for the gas chamber and medical experiments. He would be hanged in Poland in 1949.

Later that night yet a sixth partisan battalion joined the fray: the 1st Battalion of the 1st Assault (3rd Dalmatian) Brigade of the 9th Dalmatian Division from the neighbouring VIII Corps. Having been sent to Drvar from Donje Peulje, 27 kilometres to the south-east, it occupied the north-eastern sector of the partisan ring around the cemetery.

*Right: The lower terrace of the graveyard, still unused in 1944, is today completely filled with graves.*



ATB



ZNACI BIBLIOTEKA

SS-Untersturmführer Dr Hermann attending to one of the injured.



ATB

Where wounded once lay . . . now rest the dead.





KUNZMANN

No photos were taken during the fierce fighting that occurred during the night but these pictures from early the following morning clearly show the exhaustion of battle and the relief of having survived the hours of darkness. With the coming of

daylight, air support was resumed and the troopers standing erect are watching dive-bombers attacking the withdrawing partisans. This is the trench on the west side of the cemetery, looking south.



ATB

The stone crosses seen on the left in the wartime picture remain, allowing us to firmly pinpoint this comparison.





MICHAELIS

**Above and right: With the morning sun casting hard shadows, these troopers are manning the trench in anticipation of the link-up with the ground forces. The fighting seems to have died down.**

**MAY 26**

All through the night the battle raged. Sometimes it was uncannily quiet, then suddenly combat erupted again. At intervals the Germans fired flares to see if the enemy was forming up for a new assault. One light had just gone out when, suddenly, a group of partisans was climbing over the wall, wildly attacking in an attempt to overrun the cemetery. The SS men shot up white flares, which silhouetted the attackers, and mowed them down with automatic fire but the attackers kept on coming. From behind the wall they threw hand-grenades into the cemetery and got some light mortars into action, while others tried to knock a hole in the wall in order to reinforce those already inside. Finally, a German platoon counter-attacked and wiped out the men who had crossed the wall.

The 3rd and 4th Lika Battalions attacked at 0100, and the 1st Battalions of both the 1st Lika and 3rd Lika Brigades at 0200. The final partisan assault went in around 0330. With the approach of first light, the partisans, realising the open terrain around the cemetery offered them no protection from air attack, started a wholesale withdrawal back to the hills.

The Fallschirmjäger greeted the first rays of light with a great sense of relief. Though the fight was far from over, the worst had passed. At 0530 a first observation aircraft appeared in the sky, many of the men on the ground waving and shouting to attract its attention. Shortly after, German ground-support aircraft returned and attacked the retreating partisans, catching many of them as they scrambled for cover. Noticing the dwindling enemy pressure, some SS men ventured out to one of the glider wrecks with a group of POWs to bring in four cases of ammunition. Lying all around the cemetery were scores of dead partisans. At 0700, 12 Ju 52s dropped re-supply containers with additional ammo. By now the fatigued airborne troops were eagerly awaiting relief by the land forces.



KUNZMANN



ATB

**The same view today, with the south-west corner of the cemetery on the left.**



*Right:* Relief of SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500 finally came at mid-morning, when the reconnaissance battalion of the 373. Infanterie-Division reached Drvar from the south. These trucks were pictured entering the town from the north, so they could well be from Grenadier-Regiment 92 (mot.) which arrived at 1230, having advanced over the mountain pass from Bosanski Petrovac. Many accounts of 'Rösselsprung' state that the airborne force was relieved by troops from the 7. SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgs-Division 'Prinz Eugen', but this is wrong as that division never reached Drvar, its advance being directed more towards the south-east.

**THE GROUND OFFENSIVE**

At 0500 on May 25 — two hours before the airborne landings at Drvar — the motorised forces of the XV. Gebirgs-Korps jumped off for their concentric offensive. However, right from the start they made slower progress than anticipated. There was unexpected resistance from strong partisan forces along their axes of advance, and there was very poor communication between the various elements which resulted in lack of co-ordination of their movements. Blown bridges further hampered their advance.

Although the plan had called for Kampfgruppe Willam to relieve the SS paratroop battalion, it was a dismounted squadron from Aufklärungs-Abteilung 373 (the 373. Infanterie-Division's northern column), that reached Drvar first, fighting its way into town over the hills from the south-west and linking up with the exhausted paratroopers at 1045. Next to arrive, at 1230, was a company from Grenadier-Regiment 92 (mot.) which advanced from the north over the mountain pass from Petrovac. Finally, at 1600, Kampfgruppe Willam arrived from the south-west, firmly securing the German position in Drvar. The area around the town was combed but little remained except dead partisans, propaganda material and military supplies. The Germans finally captured Tito's cave, finding it evacuated, emptied of all documents and with all occupants gone.

With the link-up achieved, SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon was put under command of the 373. Division. The battalion's many wounded were immediately evacuated, the urgent cases — including battalion commander Rybka — being flown out in Fieseler Storch light planes that had landed on sloping terrain near the cemetery. Over the fol-



KUNZMANN



ATB

The picture was taken on the 'Westkreuz', looking towards the bridge over the Unac.



DIE SÜDOST-ILLUSTRIERTE



ERIK JELLEMA



ATB

*Left:* With the partisans being driven out of Drvar, the Germans were finally able to inspect Tito's cave, now abandoned and devoid of anything of intelligence value. Knowing they would probably have to give up Drvar sooner or later, the Germans immediately destroyed the wooden cabin, in case it was recaptured by the partisans. After the war, in Communist Yugoslavia, Tito's cave became a site of national pilgrimage, tens of thousands visiting it every year. The wooden hut was rebuilt and a small museum set up at the foot of the hill. However, all this changed with the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991 and the outbreak of the bitter civil war the following year.

In August 1995, as part of their Operation 'Storm', Croatian armed forces occupied Drvar. They expelled the Serb population and destroyed the cabin, the veneration of Tito being seen by them as a part of Serbian domination. *Centre:* When NATO peacekeeping forces visited the cave for a battlefield tour on 'Rösselsprung' in January 2001, there was no sign of the cabin. *Right:* With the return of peace to the region, it was decided to rebuild the hut a second time, and a new replica was completed in 2006. Close examination with the pictures taken in 1944 show that its design is similar but not identical to the original structure.



**Right: The day following their relief, the Germans buried their dead in a mass grave near the cemetery, forcing captured partisans and civilians to dig the pit. One German witness, Wachtmeister Ortner of Aufklärungs-Abteilung 373, recalled that some 80 men were interred, which approximates the final number of over 65 killed recorded in the German after-action reports.**

Following days, the airborne dead were buried in a plot just south of the cemetery, the Germans forcing civilians to dig the graves. Wooden crosses were put on them. The glider pilots recovered the gliders that could still be used, taking only the fuselages and leaving the wings, mostly broken anyway, behind on the battlefield. The gliders that could not be salvaged were made unusable by removing the control panel. On May 29, their own transport having reached Drvar, the battalion motored north to Petrovac and from there to Bihac, all traffic now taking place at night because of the ever-present Allied fighter-bombers during daytime. On June 11, the unit reached billets in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, where it would stay for 18 days to recuperate and absorb replacements.

Heavy fighting continued around Drvar for several more days as partisan forces tried to recapture the town and the German ground forces tried to engage and annihilate as many of the enemy formations as they could. On June 4, the 2. Panzer-Armee called an end to Operation 'Rösselsprung'.

Many accounts of 'Rösselsprung' state that SS-Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon 500 was 'destroyed' in the fighting, claiming that of the 874 men that had landed at Drvar only some 200 survived fit for service at the end of the battle, but this assertion needs to be differentiated. According to official German after-action figures dating from June 10, the battalion had 61 killed, 114 seriously and 91 lightly wounded and 11 missing, making for a total of 277 casualties. An earlier report from June 7 quoted even lower figures: 50 killed, 132 wounded and six missing, i.e. a total of 188. Even if one allows for the casualties suffered by the attachments (of the 36 glider pilots five had been killed and seven wounded; of teams Zawadil and Benesch two men had been killed and 24 wounded, etc) this is far from the reputed 650 casualties.

Overall German losses of the XV. Gebirgs-Armee for the period May 25 to June 4 were 123 killed, 456 wounded and 26 missing, adding up to a total of 605. However, these figures are without the losses of the 7. SS-Division, SS-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 105 and Aufklärungs-Abteilung 369. Their casualties raise the total German loss to an estimated 343 killed and 881 wounded.

Partisan losses, according to OKW communiqué at the time, were 6,240. However, reliable Yugoslav records put the partisan casualties very much lower: Tito's General Headquarters, the Escort Battalion, Officers' School and other units stationed at Drvar lost 152 killed, nine wounded and three missing; the 1st, 4th, 6th, 9th and 39th Divisions together lost 247 killed, 470 wounded and 85 missing, making for an overall total of 966 casualties. However, to these military losses must be added the many civilians massacred by the Germans in Drvar.

**Right: None of the soldiers known to have been killed and buried at Drvar have been transferred to an official German war cemetery and, according to the German War Graves Commission database, they all still lie where they were interred at Drvar. If this is true, this nondescript piece of pasture south of the civilian cemetery is still a mass grave!**



ZNACI BIBLIOTEKA



KUNZMANN

**The field burial site was lined with stones and a low wooden railing. Two crosses were erected and a sign saying 'SS-Fallschirmjäger 25.5.1944'. Beside the main plot were four individual graves with named crosses. In this view the civilian cemetery — the site of the battalion's final stand — can be seen in the background.**



ATB



**Right:** Set up in the park below Tito's cave is the hulk of an Italian CV-35 light tank, reputed to be one of the three vehicles of this type that equipped the tank platoon from the I Proletarian Corps that was stationed at Drvar in May 1944. Two of them engaged in a short skirmish with the Fallschirmjäger during the airborne raid — a famous incident that has become part of partisan folklore.



ATB

Both sides claimed victory in this battle. The Germans succeeded in disrupting Tito's headquarters, scatter the partisans in the Drvar area, and capture large amounts of weapons, equipment and supplies. The partisans saved Tito and decimated an SS parachute unit. Each side, in its own way, won partial success but neither achieved an outright victory.

The 2. Panzer-Armee commented: 'The operation against the partisans enjoyed considerable success. (1) It succeeded in destroying the core region of the Communist partisans by occupying their command and control centres and their supply installations, thereby considerably weakening their supply situation. (2) It forced the elite Communist formations to give battle and severely battered them, forcing them to withdraw tired and exhausted due to shortages of ammunition and supplies and to avoid further combat. (3) The capture of landing fields used by Allied aircraft, administrative establishments and headquarters used by Allied missions forces them, even if the terrain is abandoned again by our own troops, to fully re-organise and rebuild. (4) The Allies have from direct observation obtained a true picture of the combat power of the partisans. (5) For our own conduct of battle, important signal documents, code-books, wireless equipment and intelligence material were captured. (6) This success was embattled by our own troops under the most difficult conditions, which included supply problems caused by numerous trucks being knocked out by enemy air attacks.'

After the operation, Generalfeldmarschall von Weichs, the OB Süd-Ost, declared himself 'satisfied' with the operation 'although it did not entirely conform to expectations'. The German High Command was less content. Hitler believed that Tito had been warned from the Croatian side and demanded that Croat units would in future no longer be employed in operations of this kind.

However, in the final analysis, Operation 'Rösselsprung' was a failure for the Ger-

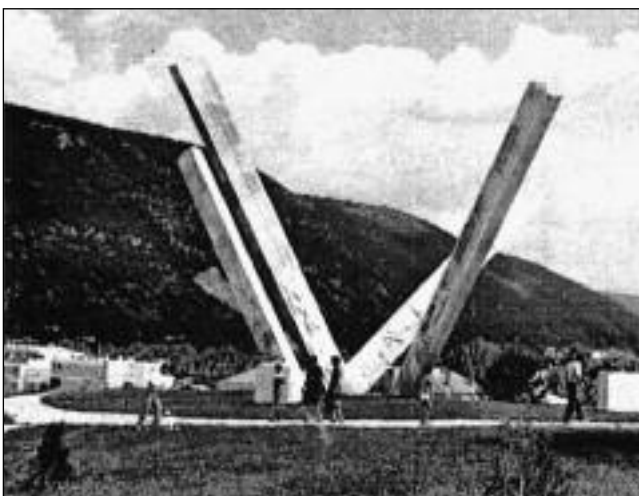


ERIK JELLEMA

**Also on display in the park for many years was the framework of a German DFS 230 glider, said to be an original relic from the landing of 1944. It was still there when the NATO battlefield tour was held in 2001 but, with an unbelievable disregard for its historical value, it has since been scrapped!**

mans. The single main objective of the whole undertaking, overriding all others, was to eliminate Tito, the man who personified the partisan movement. The Germans failed to do so, hence the operation did not achieve its

purpose. The partisans quickly recovered from their losses and set up in new locations. Drvar reverted to partisan control within weeks. Within a year, the last Germans were driven out of Yugoslavia.



BOSNIC

**Left:** Something similar occurred with the huge partisan memorial that was erected in the town park on the high ground across the road from the Orthodox Church. Designed by Croat artist Marijan Kokovic (himself a Political Commissar with the 13th Proletarian Brigade during the war) and officially known as the Spomenik Stalinisma, it was completed in the 1950s.



ATB

It was blown up by the Croat Army in early 1996 — much to the chagrin of the local Bosnians, especially because it occurred after the Dayton Peace Agreement of December 1995 and a few days before the Croats were scheduled, under the treaty, to pull out of the area. **Right:** Today the concrete chunks of the demolished memorial still lie where they fell.