

Warrior

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Gebirgsjäger

German Mountain Trooper 1939–45



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FRONT COVER **This posed propaganda shot, used in a popular wartime postcard, shows a Gefreiter of Gebirgsjäger with the MG34. Note the sun goggles, and the metal Edelweiss badge worn on the left side of the Bergmütze.**

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GEBIRGSJÄGER: GERMAN MOUNTAIN TROOPER 1939-45

INTRODUCTION

The history of Germany's mountain troops is a fairly short one, such troops being a comparatively recent addition to her armed forces. Mountain warfare in general terms up until the outbreak of World War I had been predominantly related to the suppressing of bandit activity in the high, inaccessible peaks that provided an excellent hiding place for renegades of all kinds. On the outbreak of war in 1914 three countries, Austria, France and Italy, all of whom had troops trained in mountain warfare to protect their Alpine borders (Austria with its mountain 'Schützen', Italy with its 'Alpini' troops and France with its *Chasseurs Alpins*), were drawn into the conflict. Invariably, such units made heavy use of men who were recruited from the localities in which they were to operate and had an intimate knowledge of the terrain.

Mountain troopers from the Imperial German Army in 1915. These soldiers, from 2 Kompanie, 1. Bayerische Schneeschuhbataillon, were the direct forerunners of the Wehrmacht Gebirgsjäger. The Bergmütze, trademark of the mountain troops, was closely modelled in the version worn in the Imperial German Army.



Germany at this time had no dedicated alpine troops of its own, but southern Germany had no shortage of men with expert mountaineering abilities and these were soon put to good use in training soldiers in the requisite skills. In 1915, after Austria and Italy had broken off diplomatic relations, the German Army's first mountain unit was formed to assist Austria in the defence of her southern frontier.

This unit, initially only of approximately divisional size, despite the title it was to be given, was known as the Alpenkorps (Alpine Corps) and on 19 May 1915, Generalleutnant Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen, a mountain warfare expert, was appointed as its first commander. Formed at Lech in Bavaria, the Korps units were dispatched to the Austrian South Tyrol on 25 May. The commander in the Tyrol, General der Kavallerie Viktor Dankl had intended to deploy the Korps in the area of Bruneck-Brixen-Bozen-Auer where it was to be used as a mobile strike force. In the event, however, orders from the German high command on 4 June stipulated that the Alpenkorps must remain on Austrian territory as Germany and Italy were not in a state of war. After some familiarisation and ski training, the Alpenkorps would spend the next five months deployed in Rayon V in support of Feldmarschalleutnant Ludwig Goigingers 'Pustertal' Division.

The new Alpenkorps fought extremely well, one of its most successful commanders being none other than the future Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, who won the coveted Pour le Merite ('Blue Max') leading a Württemberg Gebirgstruppe unit against the Italians. The skills learned during World War I were not forgotten and Germany maintained and developed its mountain units until they were among the world's best. The Gebirgsjäger quickly attained an elite status that they still hold today. The current German Army retains a small but expertly trained and highly motivated force of Gebirgsjäger who still proudly wear the Edelweiss badge of the mountain rifles.

CHRONOLOGY

May 1915	Alpenkorps created.
June 1935	Gebirgs Brigade created.
April 1938	Gebirgs Division created.
August 1939	2 Gebirgs Division created around former Austrian soldiers.
September 1939	1 and 2 Gebirgs Divisions involved in battle of Lemberg.
June 1940	2 Gebirgs Division victorious at Narvik.
March 1941	5 Gebirgs Division takes part in the capture of Crete.
August 1941	1 and 4 Gebirgs Divisions participate in the encirclement of huge Soviet forces at the battle of Uman.
June 1942	The first Waffen-SS mountain troop unit, 6 SS-Gebirgs Division Nord, is formed.
July 1942	1 and 4 Gebirgs Divisions strike through the Caucasus mountains and by 21 August have planted the German flag on Mount Elbrus, the highest peak.
November 1942	Gebirgsjäger Regiment 756 becomes the only mountain troop unit committed to battle in North Africa.
November 1943	5 Gebirgs Division relieved after 20 months fighting in the swamps of the Volkhov front.
June 1944	Generaloberst Dietl killed in air crash.
March 1945	1 Gebirgs Division captures Csomend during the final offensive of the war on the Eastern Front, Operation Frühlingserwachen.

RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Enlistment

Following the end of World War I, the Army of the new German Weimar Republic, known as the Reichswehr, was limited by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles to a mere 100,000 men, to be formed into seven infantry and three cavalry divisions.

Almost immediately on taking power, the National Socialists initiated a rapid build-up of the armed forces. Coupled with this there was an explosion in the number of non-military organisations that were used to give covert military training.

Each year some 200–300,000 Germans underwent a compulsory period of State Labour Service in the *Reichs Arbeits Dienst* (RAD). Although much of the service carried out by those serving with the RAD was of a constructional or agricultural nature, it was a uniformed organisation, run on overtly military lines and carried out military-style drill training. Such training may well have involved the carrying of shovels rather than rifles, but the drill movements themselves were clearly intended to impart skills in the handling of weaponry.

Political organisations were also used to teach skills useful to the military. The Party's Flying Corps, the *National Sozialistische Flieger Korps* (NSFK), was used to give basic flying training and the Motor Corps, or *National Sozialistische Kraftfahrkorps* (NSKK), gave driver training and instruction on vehicle maintenance.

The Gebirgsjäger were represented within the 100,000-man Reichswehr, the mountain units being included in the general expansion of the military when, in 1935, the need for subterfuge to conceal military training ended and universal military conscription was reintroduced.

The state of Bavaria had maintained a core of state police officers trained in mountaineering skills and this group was placed under the command of General Ludwig Kübler. Within two years, the unit had grown in strength to such numbers as merited expansion to Brigade status, and the new Gebirgs Brigade was placed under the command of General Hubert Lanz. This Brigade in turn would form the nucleus of 1 Gebirgs Division.

In 1938 the annexation of Austria brought a whole new source of skilled mountain soldiers from the former Austrian Army, and these would constitute the core of 2 and 3 Gebirgs Divisions.

All German males between the ages of 17 and 25 were required to register for military service. At least up to the start of World War II, it was possible for a young man to obtain a deferment of military service if he was undergoing some technical training such as an

A fresh batch of enlisted trainees are addressed, with their senior NCO instructors. Note that they do not yet wear the Bergmütze, but the standard Feldmütze worn by all other branches of the armed forces.



'Ich schwere bei Gott ...' New recruits to the Gebirgstruppen swear the oath of allegiance. They have their right hand raised and their left hand touching the regimental colours. Note the Gorget and aluminium braid bandoleer worn by the standard bearer who is flanked by officers with draw sabres.



apprenticeship. It was felt that the skills learned, for instance in engineering or electrical work, would almost certainly be useful to the armed forces.

Ultimately, however, the day would come for every German male when he would be required to report to his local *Wehrkreis* (Military District) offices for registration. Here his details would be taken, a medical examination undergone, and any skills that might make him suitable for service in a particular branch of the armed forces were recorded. He would be allocated to the *Ersatz und Ausbildungs Abteilung* (Replacement and Training Detachment) of his assigned unit, and issued a *Wehrpass* or Military ID Book. This book would list all his personal details, education, next of kin, etc, any special skills and languages, service in the RAD, and his intended unit. As well as being his personal identification, it could be used to prove that he had fulfilled his duty to register for military service.

Thereafter, the future soldier would return to his everyday civilian life and await his call-up papers. These would eventually be sent to him by registered mail and would instruct him when and where to report for duty.

As with most armies, there was an element of choice available to the prospective soldier as to which branch of the military he wished to serve with, at least up until the time he was called to register. After that point, the Wehrmacht was as likely as any other army to make illogical and perverse decisions; assigning soldiers to units that seemed totally inappropriate. Consequently, many young men volunteered before they were drafted, in order to have the chance of joining the military arm of their choice.

Prior to the introduction of conscription in 1935 it would have been normal for prospective soldiers to volunteer for their own choice of *Waffengattung* (Branch of Service) in the normal way. German soldiers



Gebirgsjäger training up in the high peaks. They are wearing the mountain troop Anorak – note the range of colours, and snow goggles worn to protect against glare. The trooper in the foreground appears to be wearing the Heeres Bergführer badge on his left breast pocket.

on active service during World War II fell into two basic categories, the *Berufsoldat* or Career Soldier who had made a conscious decision to make military service his chosen future career, and those considered *Auf Kriegsdauer*, 'in for the duration' only, who would eventually return to civilian life. The Gebirgsjäger would have been no different to any other branch and featured a mixture of both categories of soldier.

After the outbreak of war, the Gebirgsjäger saw its fair share of coverage in both newspaper and newsreel reports of Germany's initial stunning successes during the Blitzkrieg period. The National Socialists made extremely effective use of propaganda, and were well aware of the impact dramatic photographs could have. They ensured that the German newspapers and magazines being published had a high photographic content. Magazines like the famed *Signal*, which was translated into many languages, including English, were years ahead of their time in the use of colour photography. Even by today's standards, *Signal* was a well designed and laid out magazine. Several feature articles showed romantic pictures of Gebirgsjäger in the high mountain peaks, and of course the successful invasion of Norway (Operation Weserübung) and the subsequent battle for Narvik thrust the Gebirgsjäger in to the public eye. To

commemorate this success (which unbeknown to most of the German public teetered on the brink of failure before the enemy finally withdrew), a much-publicised new decoration, the Narvik Shield, was instituted. Featured as one of the central motifs of this new award was the Edelweiss insignia of the mountain troops. Such priceless publicity ensured that there was to be no shortage of recruits for this elite branch of the Wehrmacht.

At this juncture, it is also worth mentioning recruitment into the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* (SSVT), the forerunner of the Waffen-SS, which would eventually field several of its own Gebirgs Divisions. Although by the time most of these were formed, the extremely selective recruitment measures listed below would of necessity have been considerably watered down – in fact many members of the Waffen-SS Gebirgs Divisions were simply conscripted – a significant number of members of the first SS mountain unit, SS-Gebirgs Division Nord, would have been initially recruited under such terms. Enlistment into the SSVT was entirely voluntary. The Wehrmacht jealously guarded its status as the sole bearer of arms (*Waffenträger*) in the service of the nation and did all it could to ensure that the expansionist aims of Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler were held in check. One important concession granted was that service in the

One essential skill which had to be learned by mountain troops was the safe recovery of disabled comrades. Here a Gebirgsjäger, playing the part of a wounded man, is brought down to safety on the back of an abseiling comrade.

SSVT was to be considered as having fulfilled the individual's obligation for compulsory military service, thus in some ways at least, service in the SSVT equated to service in the Wehrmacht.

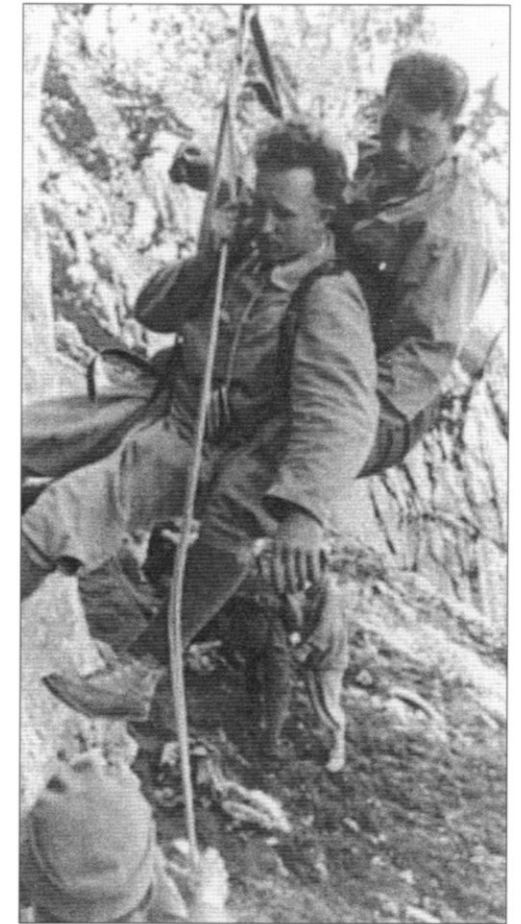
Though at this point in time, prior to the outbreak of war, there existed no SS-Gebirgsjäger units *per se*, it is worth noting that Waffen-SS mountain units played a significant part in actions on the southern sector of the Eastern Front. They were especially active in the war against the Partisans in the Balkans, and many of the cadre of these late war units had joined the SSVT in the early days.

Recruitment into the SSVT was very selective, and it is interesting to note some of the following qualifications necessary for service in the military branch of the SS. An original wartime recruiting leaflet entitled 'Wie komme ich zur SS-Verfügungstruppe?' (How do I join the SS-VT?) stated that candidates had to:

- 1 be between the ages of 17 and 22
- 2 be physically fit for service in the SS
- 3 have an acceptable political outlook
- 4 provide evidence of 'Aryan' ancestry back to 1800
- 5 be neither married nor engaged to be married
- 6 have fulfilled RAD obligation
- 7 have parents' written permission if at the minimum entry age of 17
- 8 have completed the course or obtained a release from the appropriate supervisor if undergoing professional training such as an apprenticeship
- 9 pay for any dental treatment required to bring the applicant up to standard before enlistment
- 10 have good eyesight without glasses
- 11 have no criminal record, or criminal proceedings pending.

In general terms, recruitment into the Gebirgsjäger was done on a geographic basis. Recruits who joined or were conscripted in a particular area would be likely to end up in the local unit and by far the greatest number of recruits into the Gebirgsjäger were from southern Germany, Bavaria and the Austrian Tyrol. This was far from being universal, however, and in each local unit there would also be a scattering of individuals from other parts of the Reich.

A parade of mountain troops is addressed by its commanding officer. Note the aluminium brocade dress belt. The steel helmet, rather than the peaked service cap, was the normal form of headwear for parade dress. The mountain troops' edelweiss sleeve patch is seen here to good advantage.



The principal demographic mix in each Mountain Division would be roughly as shown in the following chart. The chart indicates the number or name of the unit, the date it was founded, its controlling *Wehrkreis* and 'home' town where appropriate, and the region from which it drew most of its personnel, again if a specific region was predominant.

Division	Founded	Wehrkreis	Home Base	Make-up
1	1935	VII (Munich)	Garmisch	Bavarians, Austrians
2	1935	XVIII (Salzburg)	Innsbruck	Austrians
3	1935	XVIII (Salzburg)	Graz	South Germans
4	1938	IV (Dresden)	Dresden	Bavarians, Austrians
5	1938	XVIII (Salzburg)	Salzburg	Bavarians, Austrians
6	1939	XVIII (Salzburg)	Klagenfurt	Bavarians
7	1939	XIII (Nuremberg)	Nuremberg	Various
8	1939	XVIII (Salzburg)	Norway	Various
9	1939	XVII (Vienna)	Dachstein	Various
157	1939	XVIII (Salzburg)	Various	Various
188	1940	XVIII (Salzburg)	Various	Various

As well as the above mentioned Mountain Divisions, a small number of *Hochgebirgs Jäger Bataillonen* (High Alpine Rifle Battalions) were formed as follows:

- Hochgebirgs Jäger Bataillon Nr.1
- Hochgebirgs Jäger Bataillon Nr.2
- Hochgebirgs Jäger Bataillon Nr.3
- Hochgebirgs Jäger Bataillon Nr.4

In addition to these army divisions, the following Mountain Divisions of the *Waffen-SS* were created:

Division	Make-up
6 SS Gebirgs-Division Nord	German/Austrian
7 SS Freiwilligen-Gebirgs-Division <i>Prinz Eugen</i>	Hungarian/Romanian/Jugoslav
13 Waffen-Gebirgs-Division der SS <i>Handschar</i>	Croat
21 Waffen-Gebirgs-Division der SS <i>Skanderbeg</i>	Albanian
23 Waffen-Gebirgs-Division der SS <i>Kama</i>	Croat
24 Waffen-Gebirgs (Karstjäger) Division der SS	Mixed
Waffen-Gebirgs-Brigade der SS <i>Tartar</i> Nr 1	Tartars
Osttürkischer Waffen-Verband der SS East European	Moslems

Training

On receiving his call-up notice and reporting for duty, the prospective mountain soldier would first undergo the standard, basic military training syllabus common to all soldiers.

Because *RAD* service was compulsory for almost every individual and previous membership of the Hitler Youth was common, most recruits came to the Army with a much higher awareness of the realities of military life than was the case in many other countries. In the *RAD* the recruit would have learned the significance of military rank structures and basic drill movements. They would leave extremely fit and accustomed to wearing uniform.

Throughout all of the civil and paramilitary organisations of the Third Reich, sports were given the highest possible profile. This ensured that when the time for military service came, less training was needed to bring the recruit up to peak fitness than would otherwise have been the case. Consequently more time could be spent on purely military training.

OPPOSITE Mountain trooper training with the MG34 machine gun, with bipod fitted for use in the light support role. The wrapping of belts of ammunition around the neck clearly suggests a deliberate posed shot. However these weapons, with their high rate of fire, had a voracious appetite for ammunition.



Care of the unit's pack animals was essential. Here, in a shot taken on the island of Crete, an Obergefreiter of Gebirgsjäger gives a refreshing drink of water to his mule. He is using a captured British steel helmet as a drinking bowl.



Nevertheless, basic military training was demanding. As well as honing the skills in drill movements, field craft and firearms training which most Germans would inevitably have had before entering military service, basic training equipped the recruit for combat service. For those who elected to serve in a Gebirgs Division, physical fitness was clearly of the highest importance. Exercises under live fire were widely used in the German armed forces whose soldiers, unlike those in many other armies, were encouraged to use their initiative. Thus if an NCO or Squad Leader was killed or injured, a junior rank would have the skills and confidence required to take over.

After their first few weeks of training, when the recruits had been kitted out with a uniform and given some basic instruction on the 'niceties' of military life, they would swear the oath of allegiance. Normally, six recruits at a time would stand in front of an officer with his sword drawn, place one hand on the flag, raise the other and swear the oath,

Ich schwöre bei Gott diesen heiligen Eid, daß ich dem Führer des Deutschen Reiches und Volkes Adolf Hitler, dem Oberbefehlshaber der Wehrmacht, unbedingten Gehorsam leisten und als tapferer Soldat bereit sein will, jederzeit für diesen Eid mein Leben einzusetzen.

'I swear by God this sacred oath that I shall render unconditional obedience to Adolf Hitler, the Führer of the German Reich, supreme commander of the armed forces, and that I shall at all times be prepared, as a brave soldier, to give my life for this oath.'

In addition to the basic infantry training, or what might be considered the 'basic military syllabus', Gebirgsjäger were trained in mountaineering skills such as rock climbing, abseiling, skiing, map reading and, most importantly, in safety and survival skills for existing in the high peaks, where temperatures could drop rapidly to well below freezing and shelter was at a premium.

Above all else Gebirgsjäger were expected to maintain their already high standards of physical fitness at all times, without which, of course, operating in such circumstances would be difficult, if not impossible. This too added to the elite status accorded to these first-class soldiers.

Given the restrictive type of terrain in which they were intended to operate, mountain troops rarely worked at much more than battalion strength in any one area. Men were trained to be aware of and recognise indications of imminent changes in weather patterns and alert to the possibility of avalanche conditions arising as they passed through an area. Mountain troops were trained to move in zigzag fashion, in single file column and well spaced out to minimise losses if an avalanche did occur.

One major attribute that was essential to a mountain trooper was flexibility: the ability to adapt quickly to changing conditions and to make use of local indigenous pack animals. The reindeer used by some Gebirgsjäger in Lapland, the dog-sleds used on the Murmansk front and the Bactrian camels which were often used in the Caucasus, were far more suitable to the local terrain than the Gebirgsjägers' own horses and ponies, and a major factor in the successful deployment of these troops.

Gebirgsjäger were also trained in specialist pioneer skills. The Gebirgspioniere (mountain sappers) might be expected to blast away a rock fall that blocked a pathway, create new paths and roads, rig rope bridges over chasms, larger pontoon bridges over fast-flowing mountain rivers or construct bunkers and other defensive works.

Mountain troop medical personnel were trained to use special stretchers allowing injured or wounded personnel to be safely lowered down rock faces, and were also skilled in the treatment of frostbite, temporary snow blindness, rope burns and other typical climbing injuries. Dog teams, usually St. Bernards, were also occasionally used by Gebirgsjäger together with mini-pack animals, carrying medical supplies.

Gebirgsjäger also required better than average skills in their communications personnel. Radio sets were often found to be almost useless in the high mountain valleys because the terrain blocked signals. Gebirgsjäger were adept at rigging aerials up in the highest branches of trees in the mountain areas to improve reception, as well as in the use of multiple relay stations, and even the use of semaphore flags.

When on active service in the type of terrain in which the Gebirgsjäger often operated, many essential supplies had to be laboriously brought in on foot. Here a trooper in white snow camouflage, trudges through the snow carrying loaves of bread for his comrades.



DAILY LIFE

Appearance

Gebirgsjäger were set apart from most German troops by the exceptionally large range of uniform items available to them, any of which may be seen in wartime photos (though some, such as the Panzer clothing worn by personnel in some mountain units, is rarely seen). Far too much space would be required to describe each and every variant of this large range of clothing, so only a brief overview is given here. Fuller details of Gebirgsjäger uniforms and insignia may be found in several of the books listed in the bibliography. The uniforms may be considered under the following basic headings:

- Parade Dress
- Service Dress
- Special Gebirgsjäger Clothing
- Working Dress
- Camouflaged Dress

Parade Dress

Gebirgsjäger troops' parade dress consisted of the 'Waffenrock' tunic with piped trousers and steel helmet. The Waffenrock tunic was a single-breasted pocketless tunic with 'Swedish cuffs'. It was cut from fine field-grey wool, with a contrasting dark green woollen badgecloth collar. The front opening of the tunic, the collar and cuffs would be piped in the green 'Waffenfarbe' (Branch of Service Colour) of the Gebirgsjäger.

On the collar were placed aluminium braid bars or 'Litzen' mounted on a green wool base. Smaller versions of these patches were also featured on the cuff. The rear vent of the jacket was decorated with three buttons on each side and was also piped in green. On the left breast was a national emblem either machine woven or hand embroidered in aluminium wire. Officer and lower rank tunics were very similar but for the heavier quality insignia worn by officers. For NCO ranks, the upper edge and front of the collar, and the edges of the cuff patches, were trimmed with flat aluminium wire tress.

Shoulder straps were dark green wool for lower ranks, piped in green and with the Regimental number embroidered in green thread. NCO straps had the same braid trim as the collar. Officer straps were in bright aluminium braid on a green underlay and carried the Regimental number in gilt metal. On the upper right sleeve was worn the machine-woven Edelweiss insignia of the Gebirgsjäger.

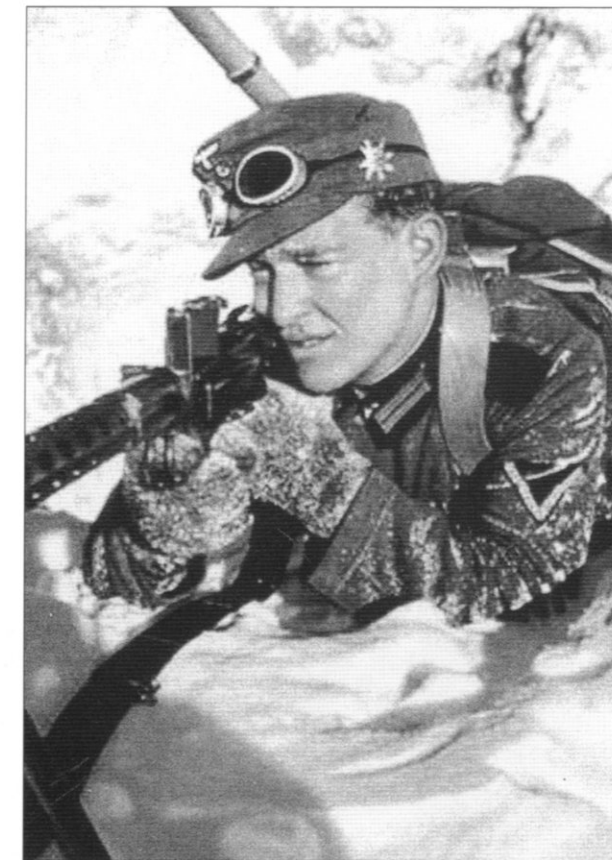
Trousers were cut from 'stone-grey' wool, were straight legged and worn tucked into jackboots. The seam of the trousers was piped in green. The steel helmet was normally worn with this form of dress though officers sometimes wore the peaked service cap with parade dress. Lower ranks wore a plain black leather belt with aluminium- or silver-finished buckle, whilst officers wore a silver brocade belt trimmed in green, with a circular aluminium buckle. Manufacture of this form of dress was discontinued on the outbreak of war.

Service Dress

Basic service dress worn by Gebirgsjäger was the universal standard four-pocket field-grey wool tunic and trousers worn by all army troops. In this form of dress, the green piping on collar patches, shoulder straps and the peaked service cap indicated the wearer's membership of the Gebirgsjäger. In addition, the traditional Gebirgsjäger Edelweiss sleeve patch was worn on the upper right sleeve, and a small metal Edelweiss on the side of the mountain cap. Lower ranks generally wore a black leather waist belt with dark green paint finish steel buckle, whilst officers wore a black leather belt with a plain double claw buckle.

From 1943 onwards, the special Bergmütze mountain cap referred to below began to be replaced by a standard field cap (*Einheitsfeldmütze* M43) which itself was closely modelled on the Bergmütze, the principal difference being only that the M43 cap had a longer peak.

When in barracks or in walking out dress, a green-piped peaked service cap or Schirmmütze could be worn. In this case, the wearer's affiliation to the Gebirgsjäger was indicated by a small Edelweiss flower in white metal worn between the national emblem on the crown and the wreathed cockade on the cap band.



This posed propaganda shot, used in a popular wartime postcard, shows a Gefreiter of Gebirgsjäger with the MG34. Note the sun goggles, and the metal Edelweiss badge worn on the left side of the Bergmütze.



Another popular period postcard of a mountain troop NCO, festooned with climbing rope and grasping an ice-axe. Note on his left shoulder, the insignia from the army marksmanship lanyard is visible.

Gebirgsjäger serving in warm regions such as North Africa and Italy would usually wear the light-weight olive denim four-pocket tropical tunic, or simply resort to wearing shirt sleeve order, along with shorts or loose-fitting trousers and canvas and leather tropical boots; mountain boots would be worn on occasion. Special light-weight webbing belts and straps were usually worn with the tropical uniform. Both the tropical field cap and the peaked tropical field cap may be found with the national colours cockade enclosed within an inverted *soutache* braid of green piping.

The basic field service dress worn by Waffen-SS mountain troops was identical to that used by the Army. Indeed many of the tunics worn were Army-issued pieces, though as the war progressed, the Waffen-SS was able to supply much of its own needs through its own clothing works. The principal difference in appearance between Army and Waffen-SS mountain troops lay with the insignia. Although the Waffen-SS mountain troops used the same green piping colour as the Army, its shoulder straps were cut from black cloth rather than dark green or field-grey. The standard SS pattern national emblem was worn on the upper left sleeve and the regulation SS rank patch on the left collar. Headgear insignia consisted of the SS pattern national emblem over a death's

head. The SS Edelweiss sleeve insignia was embroidered in silver grey and yellow cotton thread on a black oval patch and the cap version was in similar materials rather than the metal insignia used by the Army.

Specific insignia for individual SS mountain troop units was as follows:

6 SS Gebirgs Division Nord	
Collar Patch	SS Runes
Cuffband	Nord (unofficial) Reinhard Heydrich (SS-Gebirgsjäger Regiment) Michael Gaissmair (SS-Gebirgsjäger Regiment)
7 SS Freiwilligen Gebirgs Division Prinz Eugen	
Collar Patch	Odal Rune
Cuffband	Prinz Eugen (SS-Gebirgsjäger Regiment) Artur Phleps (SS-Gebirgsjäger Regiment)
13 Waffen-Gebirgs-Division der SS Handschar	
Collar Patch	Hand holding Scimitar over Swastika
Cuffband	None
21 Waffen-Gebirgs-Division der SS Skanderbeg	
Collar Patch	Wartime photos only show SS Runes being worn
Cuffband	Skanderbeg

23 Waffen-Gebirgs-Division der SS Kama	
Collar Patch	Only runes and blank collar patch. Special Divisional collar patch not proven to have been issued or worn
Cuffband	None
24 Waffen-Gebirgs (Karstjäger) Division der SS	
Collar Patch	SS Runes
Cuffband	None
Waffen-Gebirgs-Brigade der SS Nr 1	
Collar Patch	Not Known
Cuffband	None
Osttürkischer Waffen-Verband der SS	
Collar Patch	Not Known
Cuffband	Osttürkischer Waffen-Verband der SS in white on green band (Muslim colours) manufactured but not issued or worn.



This photograph is representative of a mountain trooper on campaign. Bearded and tired looking, this *Unteroffizier* clearly illustrates that life as a Gebirgsjäger was not easy.

Communications in the high mountain peaks could often be problematic, the terrain itself interfering with radio signals. Here Gebirgsjäger are laying field telephone cables, a much more reliable communications medium, but more susceptible to damage from enemy action.

One further piece of special distinguishing kit worn by Waffen-SS Gebirgsjäger deserves mention. This is the traditional fez worn by the Handschar Division. This was a simple pressed felt fez, with black tassel. The front bore the usual machine-woven SS pattern national emblem over a death's head. It was produced in maroon-coloured felt for dress wear and field-grey felt for field wear. Photographic evidence suggests it was widely worn despite giving the wearer little or no protection.

Gebirgsjäger special clothing

The wind jacket (Windjacke)

The wind jacket was an over-garment intended for wear over the field blouse. It was cut from grey-green waterproof cotton in double-breasted style, with two rows of five buttons. It featured two skirt pockets with button-down scalloped flaps, and two internal pockets on the chest, accessed via a slanted button-down flap. The reverse featured an adjustable half-belt and the cuffs could also be adjusted by a small button-down tab.

The Gebirgsjäger Edelweiss insignia was worn on the right upper arm and shoulder straps were also normally featured. No collar patches or national emblems were worn with this jacket.

Anorak

A lightweight anorak was also issued to Gebirgsjäger. This was a traditionally styled pullover garment with an attached hood, cut from tightly woven cotton. One wide horizontal breast pocket with button-down flap was flanked either side by two narrower pockets. Two pockets were also provided on the rear, at hip level. A drawstring fitting to the hood and skirt were also featured. The loose-fitting Anorak was intended to be worn over the normal service tunic and had a lace up neck, concealed by a button-down flap. The sleeves had a button-down strap for adjustment of the cuff opening. A tail-like strap was sewn to the rear of the garment and could be passed between the wearer's legs and fastened to a button at the front. Photographic evidence shows that this rarely seems to have been used. The anorak was in field-grey colour, reversible to white, and was usually worn entirely without insignia.

The mountain cap (Bergmütze)

The Bergmütze was a highly popular form of headwear modelled closely on the style of cap worn by Austrian mountain troops during World War I.

Cut from field-grey wool, it featured a short, stubby peak, and flaps at the side which could be dropped to cover the side and rear of the



This Feldwebel of Gebirgsjäger wears normal service dress with mountain boots, puttees and Bergmütze, but for some reason does not wear the usual Edelweiss arm patch on the right sleeve.



This enlisted Jäger is an NCO candidate, shown by the narrow strip of aluminium braid across the base of his shoulder strap. The puttees and mountain boots with cleated soles are clearly seen. Unusually, he does not wear the metal Edelweiss on the left side of his cap.

head in extreme cold weather. The side flaps were fastened at the front of the cap by two buttons, these buttons in turn fastening at the throat when the side flap were dropped.

On the left-hand flap was attached a small metal Edelweiss flower, the insignia of the mountain trooper. One other distinguishing feature of the Bergmütze was the insignia, with the national emblem and the cockade below it being woven in a single piece, on a 'T' shaped background. Officer caps could feature woven aluminium braid around the crown. A special white camouflage cover was also produced for wear with the mountain cap, but photos of it in use are extremely rare. A knitted balaclava-like woollen 'toque' in white wool could also be used.

Mountain trousers

A specific pattern of trouser was also introduced for mountain troops. Initially in the so-called 'stone-grey' colour but later also in standard field-grey, these had a reinforced seat and crotch and had the legs tapered to tuck into the top of the boot. The legs were slashed at the bottom, allowing the sides of the slash to be overlapped, and then secured by narrow ribbon ties. Two front pockets and one rear pocket were provided, but a fob pocket at the front. These trousers were later replaced by the standard 'Rundbundhosen'.

The mountain boot

Mountain troops were issued with a stout, double-soled, leather lace-up ankle boot. The boot had five sets of eye-holes for lacing up, with four sets of lacing hooks above these. The soles and heels were heavily studded with iron studs, and had iron cleats around the edges of the sole and heel. Trousers were worn tucked into the top of the boots, and this area was covered by the puttees mentioned below.

Puttees/Leggings

Mountain boots/trousers were worn with wool puttees. These consisted of a 73cm long, 8cm wide strip of brownish-grey cloth, with one end folded into a point, and from which ran a long narrow tape. These were wrapped around the ankle, covering the top of the boot/bottom of the trouser leg, starting with the flat end, so that when fully fitted the pointed end was on the outside of the ankle, facing to the wearer's rear. The narrow tape was then further wrapped around the ankle and secured by a small buckle.

Puttees, though they may now seem somewhat anachronistic, were used for many years and in fact the British Army used a similar puttee to that described here right up into the late 1980s. Although puttees were the norm, gaiters may occasionally be seen, and seem to have been more commonly used by Waffen-SS Gebirgsjäger units.



The standard weapon used by the mountain trooper was the Mauser Kar98k carbine as shown here carried by a Jäger during a rest-break on the march.

An excellent view of the mountain cap worn by Oberstleutnant Alfred Harss of Gebirgsjäger Regiment 99. Note that the Edelweiss badge is worn in this case with a non-regulation dark green cloth backing. Officer piping to the crown was introduced in 1942. The long peak on this example suggests it is either a privately purchased non-regulation item or a later M43 field cap.



Photos from the early part of the war show some officers (Eduard Dietl being a prime example) wearing the longer style puttees wrapped not only around the ankle but extending to just below the knee.

Panzer uniform

Of all the uniform types worn by the Gebirgsjäger, the special black clothing is by far the rarest. The use of armoured vehicles by mountain units was not common, but one unit in particular, the 7 SS Freiwilligen Gebirgs Division *Prinz Eugen* is known to have made good use of light tanks in their war against Tito's partisans in Yugoslavia. In the main these were obsolete tanks captured in the 1940 campaign in the west. Though of no great use in front line combat situations against Red Army units, they were still capable of giving a good account of themselves in battle against lightly armed Partisans.

The crews of these tanks wore the standard SS pattern black tank crew uniform but with *Prinz Eugen* unit insignia added, including the Odalrune collar patch, Divisional cuffband, and Edelweiss mountain troop patches to the right sleeve and left-hand side

of the black Panzer M43 cap.

Belief and belonging

Membership of any elite organisation always creates a special sense of belonging and in this sense the Gebirgsjäger were no different. It takes a very special kind of soldier to be able to operate in the highest peaks, in the most inhospitable areas, carrying huge loads of personal equipment, with little or no shelter and battling not just the enemy but nature itself.

From the earliest days of the war, Gebirgsjäger had been involved in a number of successful actions, such as Lemberg and Narvik, which had served to greatly enhance the reputation of these soldiers.

Like members of many elite formations, the mountain troops also wore special insignia that set them apart from other soldiers. These ranged from official insignia such as the Edelweiss, to unofficial unit level insignia and to military awards and badges, some of which were unique to the Gebirgsjäger whilst others, though not specifically for them alone, commemorated events in which the Gebirgsjäger played a very significant role. All such insignia contributed to the sense of belonging to a special breed.

Official insignia

The Edelweiss was the traditional badge of the German mountain trooper. This was worn in a number of forms. On the side of the mountain cap or M43 field cap it took the form of a silver-grey metal flower complete with stem, and with contrasting yellow metal stamens. It had holes at suitable points to allow it to be stitched to the cap. On the front of the peaked cap, it was worn as the flower only, with no stem, and placed between the national emblem and the wreathed national colours cockade. On the



sleeve it was in cloth form. This could be in machine-woven or machine-embroidered form, or occasionally hand embroidered in wire thread for officers.

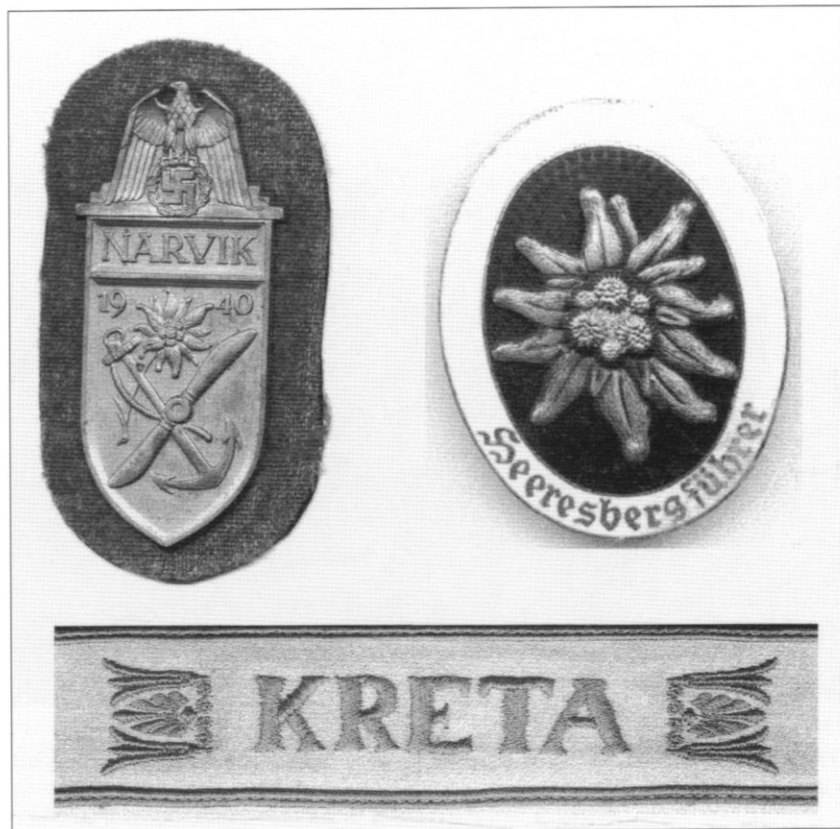
As mountain infantry, the basic badge for which most Gebirgsjäger would qualify after seeing action against the enemy three times was the Infantry Assault Badge (*Infanterie Sturmabzeichen*). This badge is seen on many of the photos throughout this work. Fashioned from silver-coloured metal it comprised a vertical oval wreath of oak leaves topped by an eagle grasping a swastika, a rifle with bayonet fixed as the central motif. Members of other non-infantry units such as the pioneer element would qualify for the General Assault Badge (*Allgemeines Sturmabzeichen*), another silver-coloured metal badge although with the eagle and swastika motif contained within the oval wreath, and sitting atop a crossed stick grenade and bayonet.

Those who had accumulated 15, 30 or 50 days respectively in hand-to-hand combat with the enemy qualified for the Close Combat Clasp (*Nahkampfspange*) in bronze, silver or gold. This clasp was worn above the left breast pocket and had as its central motif an eagle with swastika over a crossed stick grenade and bayonet, but within a square rather than oval oak leaf frame, from either side of which emerge a spray of oak leaves over sunburst rays.

These were all standard badges available to any member of the armed forces that qualified, and were not specific to the Gebirgsjäger.

Gebirgsjäger were also of course eligible for the same range of awards for gallantry and distinguished serve as any member of Germany's fighting forces: the War Merit Cross (*Kriegsverdienstkreuz*), Iron Cross (*Eisernes Kreuz*), German Cross (*Deutsches Kreuz*) and so on. There were a number of awards, however, which had a special Gebirgsjäger connection.

Gebirgsjäger in their element, with heavily loaded rucksacks on their backs, trudging up into the high peaks.



The Narvik shield

Instituted on 19 August 1940, this award was intended to recognise members of the Army, Navy and Luftwaffe who had taken part in the historic battle for the Norwegian port of Narvik.

The award consisted of a shield shape on top of which sat an eagle with folded wings, grasping a wreathed swastika in its talons. At the top of the shield was a smaller rectangular field bearing the title 'NARVIK' in block letters. On the shield itself at top left were the numerals '19' and at top right '40'. The centre of the field bore representative symbols for each branch of the services, an anchor representing the Navy, a propeller the Luftwaffe and for the Army, the Edelweiss flower of the Gebirgsjäger. The shield was in grey or silver-coloured metal for the Luftwaffe or Army and in gold-coloured metal for the Navy. The shield was attached by prongs and a metal backing plate to a piece of cloth in the appropriate colour and was sewn to the recipient's upper left sleeve. In the case of the Gebirgsjäger this was of course field-grey wool.

The Kreta cuffband

This cloth insignia, which effectively fulfilled the role of a campaign medal, was instituted on 16 October 1942 to recognise those who had taken part in the capture of the island of Crete from British and Commonwealth forces in May 1942. It comprised a white cloth band some 3.2cm wide with golden yellow 'Russia Braid' edging. In the centre, also in golden yellow embroidery was the legend 'KRETA' in capital letters, flanked either side by acanthus leaves. It was worn on the

Some of the insignia worn with particular pride by the mountain troops. Top left, the Narvik shield, in silver-grey metal on a field-grey cloth patch. Note the Edelweiss badge of the Gebirgsjäger in the centre. Top right is the very rare Heeresbergführer badge. A white metal edelweiss sits on a green enamelled field with a white enamel border bearing the title of the badge in black. Below is the cuffband worn by mountain troopers who fought in the battle for Crete, with golden yellow embroidered lettering and edges on a white band.

lower left sleeve. Members of 5 Gebirgs Division under General Julius Ringel had taken part in the battle and qualified for the award of the Kreta band.

Heeresbergführer badge

This was a qualification badge rather than a military decoration, and was authorised for wear only by qualified mountain leaders. It was awarded regardless of rank, the principal criteria being skill not military position. One of the most famous bearers of this badge was Generaloberst Dietl. The fact that such senior officers were not mere high-ranking staff officers but genuinely highly qualified mountaineers did much to foster the very high regard in which they were held by their men.

The badge was a very high quality piece, oval in shape. The central field was enamelled in green and carried in its centre a silver-coloured metal Edelweiss motif. The oval border above the green central field was enamelled in white and bore the legend 'Heeres Bergführer' in black Gothic letters.

Original examples of this insignia are extremely rare and fetch very high prices. Consequently these, like the Narvik shield and Kreta cuffband, have been widely faked. Fortunately the post-war Heeresbergführer badges have the text executed in gilt rather than black letters making them easy to detect.

A similar badge was also worn by expert mountaineers and skiers in the German police and customs forces which patrolled Germany's mountainous southern borders. In addition to these official pieces, many Gebirgsjäger units produced their own unofficial awards, usually cast in zinc, which were most often worn from the belt in the form of a fob. These usually bore the unit designation on the obverse, and the names of battles in which they had fought on the reverse.

One further type of insignia often worn was the unit tradition badge. Again these were unofficial, but widely tolerated as they helped foster unit esprit-de-corps. The following are known to have been worn, on the left side of the mountain cap or M43 field cap: a dark green cloth backing to the regulation metal Edelweiss, a small silvered representation of a mountain goat or 'Gams' and a small silvered metal representation of the Enzian flower. Many of these insignia were already incorporated into the official Divisional insignia.

A number of Gebirgsjäger, having lived their lives in the mountain regions, were expert climbers, and the Army produced a special badge, superbly crafted and enamelled, featuring the Edelweiss on a green enamel field, with a white surround bearing the title *Heeresbergführer* (Army Mountain Leader). This

A mountain troop Jäger in walking out dress. As well as the woven Edelweiss patch on his right sleeve, he wears a small alloy Edelweiss just below the national emblem on the crown of his peaked cap. Enlisted ranks would normally only wear this cap as walking out dress.





A Gebirgsjäger Unteroffizier in service dress wearing the regulation Bergmütze. This cap is easily distinguished from the later M43 field cap widely worn by all branches of the Army by its shorter, stubby peak.

title reflected the mountaineering skill of its owner, not his military rank, and the fact that this rare badge was worn by ranks ranging from NCO to full General reinforced that fact that in the Gebirgsjäger skill was what mattered.

Like many branches of the armed forces, the mountain troops had their favourite marching songs, many written specifically for them. The greatest favourite of all was probably *Erika*, a play on the fact that Erika is the German term for heather, the girl's name as well as the mountain flower. Others such as *Narviklied*, *Marsch der Gebirgsjäger* and *Es war ein Edelweiss* were also popular.

The Gebirgsjäger also maintained links with many Hitler Youth units, and it was always a special treat for the young boys to visit the mountain troops. They were given a warm welcome, and trained in skiing, rock climbing and abseiling. Garmisch, the home of 1 Gebirgs Division is still a popular winter sports destination.

The mountain troops, in general, had a very close bond with their commanders. This may have been due to the feeling of shared adversity, mutual trust and respect (the mountain troop leaders were no 'base wallahs' and would go wherever their troops had to go), the fact that these commanders took a paternal and caring interest in the welfare of their men or, most likely, a combination of all of these factors. The fact is that many of the mountain troop commanders, men such as Eduard Dietl and Julius

'Papa' Ringel, were held in very high regard by their men.

Sadly, however, this situation was not universal, and there were some, Generalfeldmarschall Schoerner being the most obvious example, who were neither well liked nor particularly respected. Schoerner was a dedicated Nazi. A brutal and intolerant man, who would sacrifice his



A posed photograph for the 'folks back home', shows the tools of the trade of the mountain trooper. It shows a fully loaded rucksack, climbing ropes, ice-axe, Mauser Kar98k and, of course, the ubiquitous Bergmütze. This postcard was produced for Gebirgs Artillerie Regiment 19 at Garmisch Partenkirchen.

men rather than consider retreat, he enthusiastically followed Hitler's regular 'fight to the last bullet' decrees.

As a rule, however, mountain troops were intensely proud of their unit affiliations, of their commanders and their achievements. The post-war German army, as already mentioned, continues the proud traditions of the Gebirgsjäger. The Edelweiss insignia has been retained, and initially the headquarters of the mountain troops, the Dietl Kaserne, was named after the 'Hero of Narvik'. In more recent times, with political correctness becoming more common and almost any connection with the Wehrmacht being frowned upon, the name has been dropped; much to the disgust of many serving and former mountain troopers.

The Gebirgsjäger still maintain an active veteran community, the whole unit veterans' association concept being far more alive and thriving in Germany than in most of the former Allied lands.

Active service

Pay

The pay scales for Gebirgsjäger soldiers were the same as those for all other troops. Unlike specialist personnel such as U-boat crews they were not accorded a special additional rate of pay, though Gebirgsjäger serving in North Africa did receive a pay addition, the *Afrika-Zulage*. Soldiers on front-line combat duties attracted the *Frontzulage* or front line supplement.

Ranks

Rank structure for Gebirgsjäger soldiers was identical to that for other non-mountain troops. In the case of privates, however, the rank of 'Jäger' was used and for senior private Oberjäger. Thereafter, the rank titles used were as for any other Army soldier. German soldiers were trained to use their initiative with every man being considered a potential NCO, able to take over if his squad leader was killed. Generally squads (Gruppen) were led by experienced NCOs. Platoons were sometimes led by senior NCOs, but more often by junior officers (Leutnante), companies by senior Lieutenants or Captains, Battalions by Majors and Regiments by Lieutenant Colonels or Colonels. In any of these cases battlefield casualties could and did result in the command passing, temporarily at least, to a more junior rank.

The main components of the typical Gebirgs Division were the Gebirgsjäger Regiments, two in number. In addition, there were the Gebirgs Artillerie Regiment and the Gebirgspioniere Bataillon, as well as support units such as the Divisional Nachschub (supply), Nachrichten (signals) Abteilung,

A Christmas card produced by Gebirgs-Pioniere Bataillon 54 in Mittenwald. The festive scene, with snow-covered trees, is finished off by an illuminated swastika.





Mountain troopers present arms at a ceremony at the memorial at Grünten as a comrade in the background salutes. The mountain troops were very strong on traditions.

Aufklärungs (Reconnaissance) Abteilung, Panzerjäger (anti-tank) Abteilung as well as smaller support elements like divisional medical staff, military police detachment, etc.

The Gebirgsjäger Regiments had their own specific numbering sequence, but the other divisional elements were usually numbered as for the division. In standard German military nomenclature, the divisional number precedes the name, but the regimental number follows the name. Divisional, regimental and company numbers are given in Arabic numerals, whilst battalion numbers are given in Roman numerals as a prefix to the regimental title, for example 5 Gebirgs-Division, Gebirgsjäger Regiment 2, II. Gebirgsjäger Regiment 138.

Each typical Gebirgsjäger Regiment was divided into three battalions (Bataillonen) and a headquarters element. A battalion would normally comprise up to 900 men and would be subdivided into three Jäger companies (Kompanien) of around 150 men each, the companies then being further subdivided into platoons (Züge) and sections or squads (Gruppen). Whilst those commanding larger units such as the division were known as commanders (i.e Divisions Kommandeur), a soldier commanding a smaller element such as a platoon or squad was designated 'leader' (i.e. Zugführer, Gruppenführer). In addition to the Jäger companies would be an *Infanterie Geschütze*

Kompanie comprising a platoon with two 7.5cm guns, a mortar platoon, and a machine gun company (*Maschinengewehr Kompanie*) with a machine gun platoon equipped with four machine guns and a combat pioneer platoon.

Life on campaign was, for the Gebirgsjäger, somewhat different to that experienced by the ordinary infantry soldier. As we have already seen, the mountain trooper had to face not only the danger of enemy action but also the physical dangers inherent in operating in an often extremely hostile environment. When necessary, however, mountain troops were also used in a normal infantry role and thus they could be found fighting in the Russian swamps and the burning deserts of North Africa as well as in the high peaks of Norway, Russia and the Balkans.

Naturally, when operating in mountainous terrain Gebirgsjäger were obliged to carry with them additional pieces of equipment not normally used by conventional infantry. These included climbing gear, rope and ice-picks. A special rucksack for mountain troops was issued to carry this additional kit.

When entering the high mountains, Gebirgsjäger would wherever possible leave behind as much of their personal kit as they could. Their heavy rucksacks and often their steel helmets, would be left with the Divisional cadre, the troops carrying only light fighting order and wearing their mountain caps.

Only essential warm clothing, climbing gear, ammunition and food would be carried. Operating in such inhospitable terrain was difficult enough without carrying large amounts of unnecessary equipment.

Food carried would generally be high in energy, high in protein but low in bulk. Foods like dried meat, dehydrated fruit and vegetables and chocolate where available were often used.

The German soldier was no different to those from any other nation in the small amount of personal equipment he carried with him to make life in the field that little bit easier. Each soldier was issued with a small sewing kit for carrying out emergency repairs to damaged clothing. He also carried a small Bakelite dish with a screw-top which could be used to store butter, fat for cooking, or preserves such as jam or marmalade. In addition he carried a small foldaway pocket-size stove that burned chemical pellets. Most commonly made by Esbit, these were very similar to the kind of equipment still issued with army ration packs today, and allowed the soldier the luxury of preparing hot (or, more likely, lukewarm) food in the field, always assuming of course that conditions allowed.

When operating in mountainous terrain, the mountain trooper would also be obliged to carry climbing equipment: perhaps a rope, pitons (usually carried in a small canvas bag), an ice-axe, snow shoes or skis. Soldiers were issued with a ration of cigarettes, recorded on a smoker's ration card (*Raucherkarte*) and noted in the soldier's paybook. Issues of soap for washing (*Seife*), and (*Razierseife*) for shaving, were also recorded in the soldiers paybook.

Occasional issues of chocolate and sweets were also made, and such high-sugar content, high-energy material, would be particularly appreciated by the Gebirgsjäger.

On occasion, when returning home on leave, soldiers were issued with a special ration pack, known as the *Führerpackette* or *Führergeschenke*, (a 'package' or 'gift' from the Führer), on orders from Hitler. This was not so much a reward for the soldier but a crude attempt at propaganda. The pack contained luxury items not normally available to many front line soldiers, and was intended to impress those at home with how well their soldiers were being cared for.



One mountain trooper on campaign took the time to photograph his mountain cap, some indication of the importance of this extremely distinctive piece of headgear to the esprit de corps of the Gebirgsjäger. This particularly clear shot shows the double button fastened flap and the Edelveiss tradition badge, these being sewn rather than pinned to the side flap.



The most famous of all of the mountain troop commanders was Eduard Dietl (centre). Dietl was extremely popular with the men he commanded and took considerable interest in their welfare. He was killed in a plane crash in Norway on 23 June 1944. In the closing stages of the war, a commemorative cuffband *Generaloberst Dietl* was bestowed on Gebirgsjäger Brigade 139.

Mountain troopers on the march into Poland, 1939. Note that the Gebirgsjäger carry the minimum of equipment. Apart from their ammunition belt these men carry only a haversack, gas mask container and steel helmet. Heavier equipment is carried by the pack animals they are leading.



Weapons

Gebirgsjäger were also issued with a number of special pieces of equipment to supplement the standard issue items. The basic weapon of the mountain trooper was the Mauser Karabiner Kar98k, the same rifle used by all the German armed forces. This weapon weighed 3.9kg, and fired a 7.92mm cartridge with a muzzle velocity of 745 metres per second. It featured an internal box magazine of five rounds.

A special shortened carbine, essentially a Czech-made variant of the Mauser, and designated the Gewehr 33/40, some 11.5cm shorter than the Kar98k but firing the same cartridge, albeit with marginally lower muzzle velocity, was also issued to mountain troops.

Sharpshooters were issued with a telescopic sight. Two types were in common use: the zF41, which gave a magnification of just x2.5, and the zF4, with a magnification of x4, the later generally being used by dedicated snipers.

Each Gebirgs Division was equipped with around 13,000 rifles.

Officers, NCOs and others carrying pistols, generally used the standard P.08 (the Luger) or P.38 9mm pistols, both being comparable semi-automatics each with an

eight round magazine inside the grip. The Luger pistol was somewhat prone to malfunctioning if not kept scrupulously clean and in front line combat conditions it was not as reliable as the P.38. Some 2,200 pistols were issued to a typical Gebirgs Division.

Squad Leaders (almost always NCOs or junior officers) often carried a machine pistol, most often the MP38/40. This robust weapon, cheap to manufacture and highly effective, featured a folding skeleton stock, and a 32-round box magazine. It weighed 4.1kg, and fired a 9mm parabellum cartridge with a muzzle velocity of 380m per second at a cyclic rate of 500 rounds per minute. It was a very effective weapon in close-quarter battle. Gebirgsjäger (and indeed soldiers from most other branches operating on the Eastern Front) also favoured the use of captured Soviet PPsH machine pistols. This was a 7.62mm weapon, with a large 71-round drum magazine. This 'soldier-proof' weapon was crudely manufactured but extremely robust and reliable and captured examples were highly prized. In photographs taken in the later part of the war, the Sturmgewehr Stg44 may also be seen in use by Gebirgsjäger. This weapon, a direct precursor of the modern assault rifle, and closely copied by famous weapons such as the Kalashnikov, fired a 7.92-short-cartridge. It featured a solid stock and 32-round curved box magazine. Due to its late introduction, it never came close to replacing earlier weapons. Though the MP38/40 features widely in war films, it was not in reality issued in anything like the number such fantasies suggest. Compared with the 13,000 rifles issued to the typical Gebirgs Division, only 500 machine pistols were issued.

Fire support was generally provided by the multi-purpose machine gun the MG34, which was later replaced by the MG42. As used by the Gebirgsjäger, these were belt-fed weapons, firing the standard 7.92mm rifle cartridge. A basic bipod was provided, which could be attached under the muzzle or under the breech. The MG34 was a superb weapon capable of laying down fire at 1,500 rounds per minute. It was expensive to manufacture, however, using machined components, and was relatively heavy at around 12kg.

In 1942 it was replaced by the MG42, a very similar weapon, but with many improvements, not the least of which was the use of die-stamped components making manufacture quicker and cheaper, providing a very fast barrel change facility, and shaving over 1kg from the weight. The MG42 could lay down devastating rates of fire of up to 1,550 rounds per minute. The biggest problem was keeping it supplied with sufficient ammunition. This superb weapon was taken into service again by the modern German Army as the MG1.

In both cases it could be fitted to a special collapsible mount, allowing it to be used in the sustained fire or anti-aircraft role. Just under 500 machine guns were issued to the typical Gebirgs division.

Grenades also featured heavily in the offensive power of the Gebirgsjäger. There were two basic types of grenade used by the German armed forces at this time, the *Stiehlhandgrenate*, commonly known as the 'stick

Two Gebirgsjäger celebrate the end of hostilities in France, posing in 'liberated' straw boaters. In years to come there would seldom be opportunities for such lighthearted behaviour.



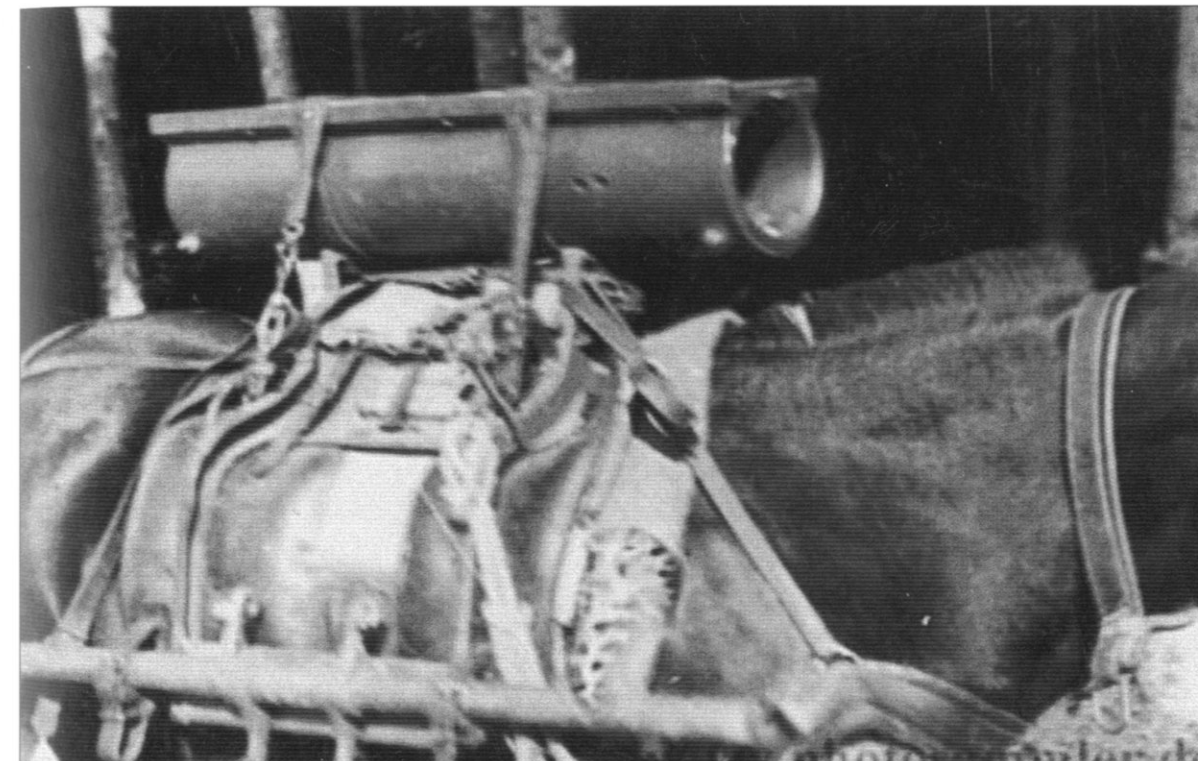
grenade' or 'potato masher', with a cylindrical charge mounted on a wooden handle (the grenade being primed by pulling a fuse cord which ran through the hollow handle), and the *Eierhandgrenate* or, 'egg grenade', so called because of its oval shape. The stick-type handle of the former allowed it to be thrown over greater distances than the latter, but its bulkier size meant not as many could be carried comfortably.

Neither of the standard German grenades caused the same degree of shrapnel damage as the typical Allied 'pineapple' grenade with the serrated casing that allowed easier fragmentation. The German grenades, however, carried a more powerful explosive charge. In mountainous areas, small rock chippings blasted through the air by the detonation of a hand grenade could cause as much damage as shrapnel.

When more effective fire support was required, assistance from mortars could be called for. The basic light mortar was the 5cm *leichte Granatewerfer 36*, a light mortar weighing just 14kg and easily broken down into its two basic components: barrel and base-plate. As its name implies, it fired a 5cm projectile weighing 0.9kg for over 500m. This robust little weapon could fire over 25,000 rounds before its barrel wore out. Although useful for mountain units due to its low weight, the projectile it fired was also light and of limited effectiveness. It began to be replaced in 1941 by the *kurzer Granatewerfer 42*. This weapon fired an 8cm 3.5kg projectile up to 1,100m. Its downside was that it weighed 12 kilos more than its predecessor, almost doubling the weight.

Up to 100 mortars were issued to the typical Gebirgs Division. Heavy fire support was provided by the Gebirgs Artillerie. Artillery weapons included the liG or *leichte Infanterie Geschutze* (light infantry gun), the siG

A 7.5cm Gebirgskanone in action. Note the compact size of this weapon, designed to be easily disassembled for transport by pack animals.



This shot shows the barrel of a disassembled 7.5cm Gebirgskanone being transported by pack horse.

or *schwere Infanterie Geschutze* (heavy infantry gun) and the sFH or *schwere Feldhaubitze* (heavy field howitzer). These were standard issue artillery pieces used widely throughout the armed forces. In addition to these the Gebirgs Division was supplied with special mountain guns, specifically the *leichte Gebirgsinfanteriegeschutze* or light mountain infantry gun, and the *leichte Gebirgshaubitze* or light mountain howitzer.

This was one of the first mountain guns developed, tracing its origin back to 1935 when the first Mountain Division was formed. It was based on an old design, the liG 18 and specially adapted to allow it to be broken down easily into its component parts for transport. It could be broken down into ten basic components for transport on horseback or by pack mules, or into six parts for air transport.

The gun was a 7.5cm calibre piece, firing a 5.45kg shell with a muzzle velocity of 221 metres per second, and for a range of up to 3,550m. The gun weighed just over 400kg. It remained in use throughout the war.

Designed by Rheinmetall-Borsig AG the *Gebirgsgeschutze 36* was also of 7.5cm calibre and entered service in 1938. It featured a split trail, was capable of high elevation and had a recoil system of the 'variable' type that automatically shortened the recoil as the elevation increased. It was provided with lightweight disc wheels, which were normally shod with solid rubber tyres but wood-spoked wheels were to be seen on some examples. As a weight-saving measure, no shield was fitted. It featured a perforated muzzle brake. A spring balancing-press was fitted to the carriage to counter the muzzle weight. It weighed 750kg. In the case of the Geb G36, the whole piece could be broken down into eight loads. The gun did suffer from a certain lack of stability when fired at low elevation, though this was common for many lightweight guns. This





Mountain troops during the advance into Poland. It is presumed that this unit is near to the front line as they have replaced their mountain caps with the steel helmet. The supply truck at left is interesting in that although the WH stencil (*Wehrmacht Heer* or *Armed Forces-Army*) is carried on the right mudguard, the number plate itself appears to be a civilian one.

occurred because at high elevation the recoil force is directed downwards, but at very low elevation the force is directed to the rear rather than down, thus forcing a turning movement with the trail spade as the fulcrum point, lifting the wheels from the ground. The Geb G36 was popular with the Gebirgsjäger, however, and gave good service throughout the war.

For heavier artillery support, the Gebirgsjäger could call upon the mountain howitzers, the heaviest weapons ever developed for use in mountain warfare. This 10.5cm calibre weapon was produced by the Austrian firm Böhler and came into general use from 1942. Weighing just under 1,700kg, it could be towed as a fully assembled gun, broken into four separate component loads on wheeled trailers which could be towed by the unique *Kettenrad* tracked motorcycles, or broken down even further into five loads for transport on pack mules. The wheels were made of a light alloy and were shod with solid rubber tyres. The ends of each of the trail legs were fitted with detachable spades. Around 68 artillery pieces were issued to each Gebirgs Division and large numbers of these weapons survived the war. Many were still in service in the mid-1960s.

In addition to conventional artillery, a number of light flak guns, usually about 12, were allocated at divisional level. In general these would be 2cm guns, often the excellent *Flakvierling* that had four 2cm barrels and was capable of putting up a substantial rate of fire. These could be mounted on the back of a vehicle such as the standard Opel Bitz or Mercedes 1500 truck, or on a wheeled carriage for towing.

As previously mentioned, at least one mountain unit, 7 SS Freiwilligen Gebirgs Division *Prinz Eugen*, also boasted its own armour. This was the exception rather than the rule. The tanks involved were smaller vehicles captured from the French in 1940, such as the Renault R7.

To transport all its men and equipment, the typical Gebirgs Division was provided with around 1,400 motor vehicles and anything up to 6,000 pack animals. These could include horses, mules and, in southern Russia, even camels are known to have been used.

Given that the average manpower of a Gebirgs Division was in the region of 14,000 men, the modest number of vehicles provided, and the fact that pack animals were used for carrying supplies and equipment into the mountains, it is clear that the average Gebirgsjäger, like most infantrymen, would have to make his way by foot.

The vehicles on issue to the Gebirgs Division were standard equipment, jeeps and light field cars like the VW Kubelwagen and Horch, and lorries such as the Opel and Mercedes. One unusual vehicle popular with the Gebirgsjäger was the NSU-manufactured *Kettenrad*. This married the front end of a motorcycle with a tracked rear to provide a motorcycle half-track. Such lightweight vehicles were excellent on soft boggy ground and over terrain where field cars and light trucks could not go. They were perfect for towing disassembled mountain guns up narrow mountain tracks and roads.

IN BATTLE

The combat histories of the Army and Waffen-SS mountain divisions were about as different as was possible. The Army units were in action along with regular mainstream formations of the armed forces from the very outbreak of war, taking part in major campaigns from Poland, France, North Africa and Italy to Russia and the Balkans, and earning an admirable reputation for courage in battle and steadfastness in defence. The majority of Waffen-SS mountain troop units, on the other hand, saw little combat against front line enemy forces until the final stages of the war and most suffered heavy casualties when they eventually did. Most of the Waffen-SS units spent the war on anti-partisan duties in the southern sector of the Eastern Front and became involved in some particularly nasty incidents with numerous atrocity allegations levelled against them. In view of the widely differing combat experiences of these units, the army units and their operational use will be covered on a chronological/campaign basis whilst the SS units are covered individually.

The Army Mountain Troops

The first actions of World War II in which Gebirgsjäger were involved were those of the Polish campaign, with both 1 and 2 Gebirgs Divisions operating on the southern sector of the front with *Heeresgruppe Süd*. The mountain troops entered Poland from Slovakia and were instrumental in the capture of the Dukla Pass

Transport by truck was an unaccustomed luxury for mountain troopers, who were more used to travelling by foot. The soldier in the centre of the rear of the truck wears the white armband with red cross emblem indicating his status as a Sanitäter.





through the Carpathian mountains. From here the Gebirgsjäger raced towards the east, their goal the city of Lemberg some 150 miles distant along a single road. A detached Kampfgruppe spearheaded the advance, arriving at the city on 14 September. The mountain troops immediately set up their positions around the city, sealing in its garrison whilst holding off determined counter-attacks. The Polish troops fought with great determination and caused significant casualties to the Gebirgsjäger. The sudden invasion of Poland by Soviet troops from the east, however, put paid to the Polish will to resist, and before the Germans could launch their assault on the city, the garrison surrendered. Both sides had gained considerable respect for the tenacity and fighting spirit of the other, and as a token of respect the defenders would only agree to surrender their city to troops of 1 Gebirgs.

Following the success of the campaign in the east, the troops of 1 Gebirgs Division were transferred to the Western Front to take part in the 'Westfeldzug'.

Their counterparts in 2 Gebirgs Division, meanwhile, had been selected to participate in the invasion of Norway, and under the command of Eduard Dietl were transported to the port of Narvik as passengers of the Kriegsmarine's destroyer fleet. The sudden appearance of ten powerful destroyers, which pulled into port and began disgorging German mountain troops, persuaded the Norwegians to surrender peacefully especially as they had sunk two Norwegian coastal defence ships on the approach to the port. By just after 1800hrs on 9 April 1940, Narvik was in German hands.

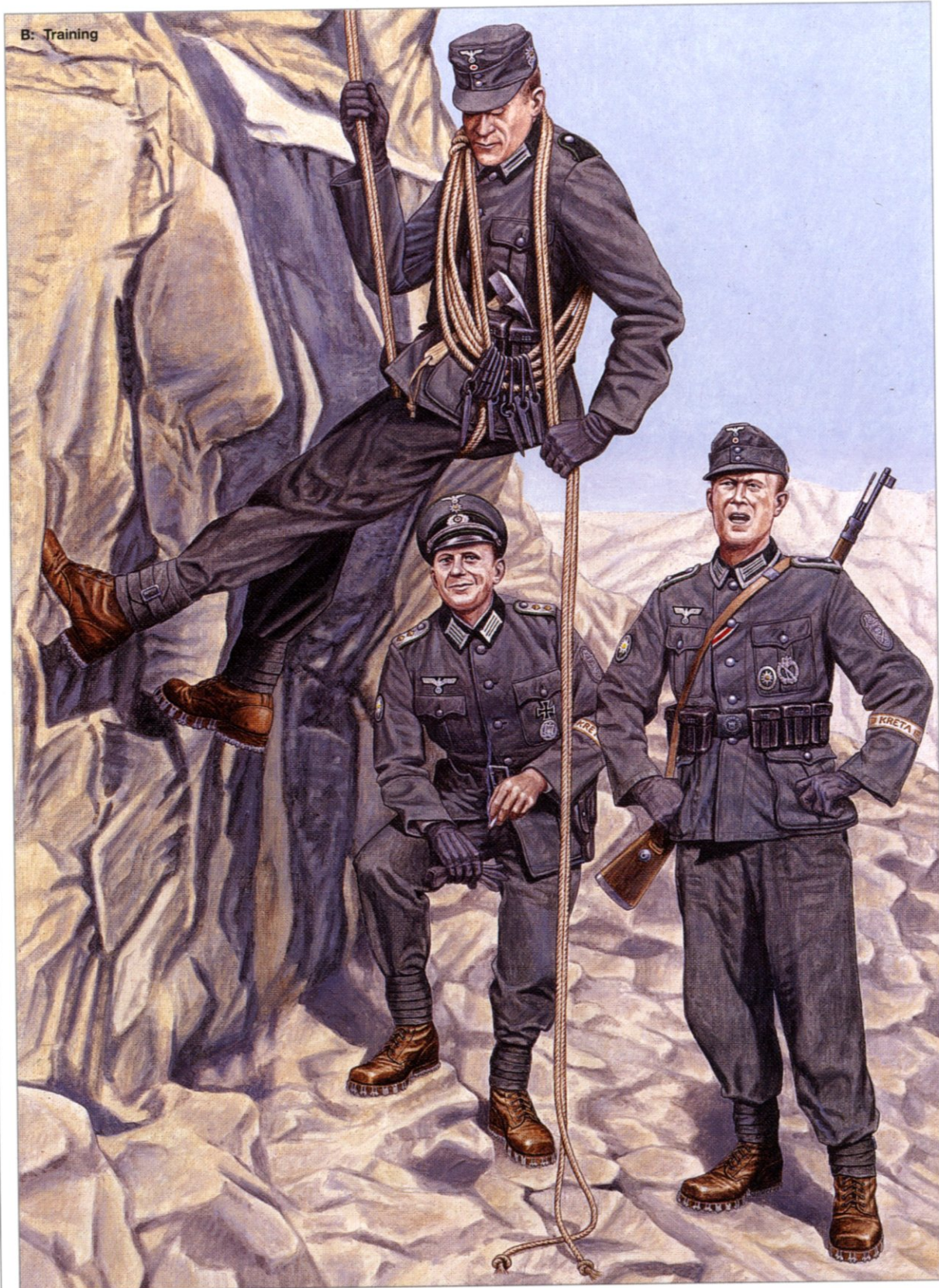
All had not gone according to plan, however, and much of the ammunition, fuel and other supplies had not reached Narvik. Only one of

Gebirgsjäger rest during the advance. Prior to 1943, mountain troops are easily identifiable as the only soldiers to wear a peaked field cap. Not until then did the M43 field cap, modelled closely on the Bergmütze, see general issue to other branches of the Army.

A: Norway, 1940



B: Training



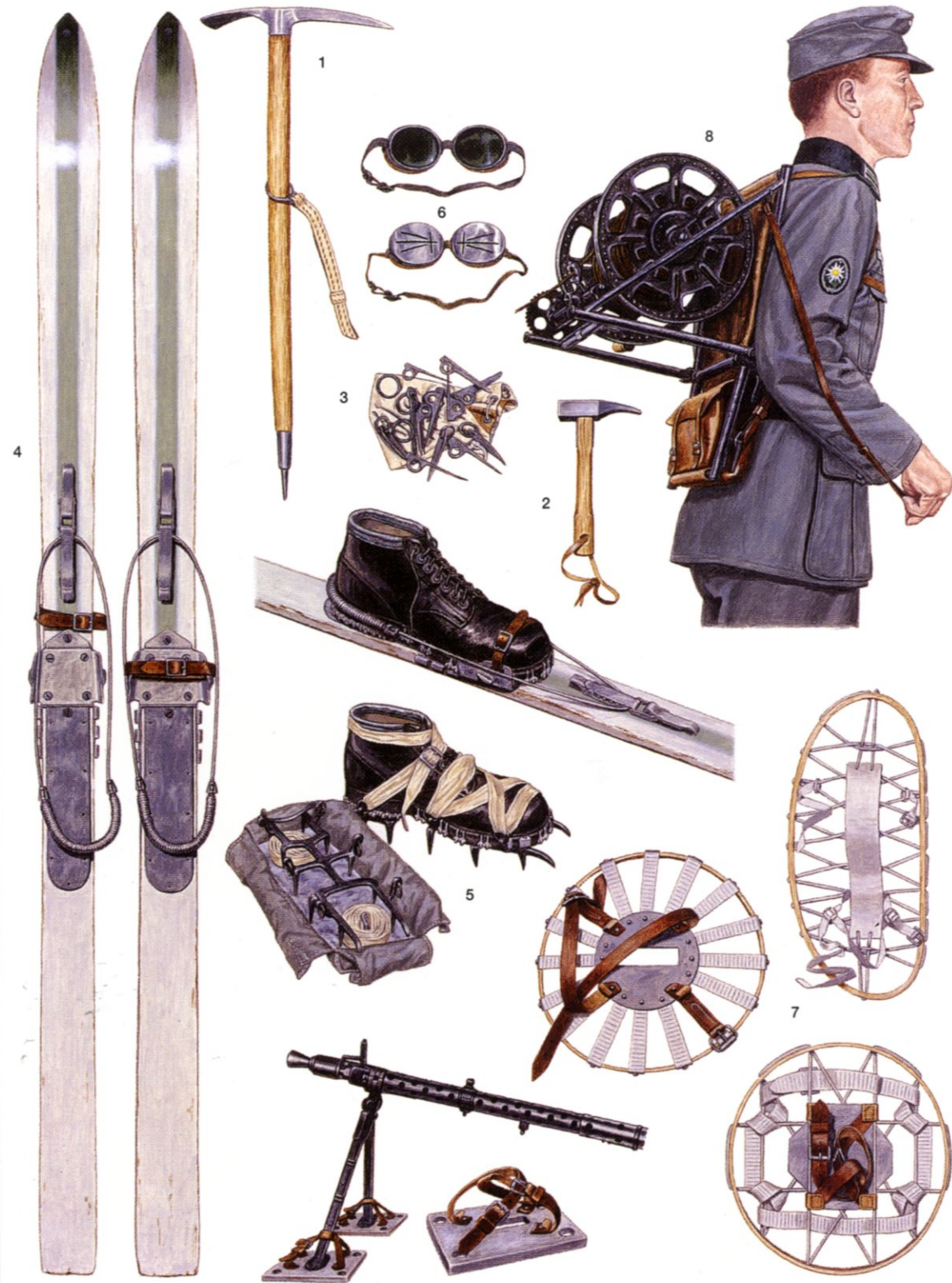
B

C: Winter warfare



C

D: Mountaineering equipment



D

E: Tropical service



E

F

F: Caucasus, 1942



G: Balkans, 1945



G



Gebirgsjäger survey the terrain from an advantageous position. Though wearing the steel helmet, their mountain caps can be seen tucked into their belts.

the designated supply ships, the former whaling ship *Jan Wellem*, had reached Narvik. A surprise attack by British destroyers on the morning of 10 April had seen two of the German destroyers sunk. Three days later, the British destroyers were back, this time supported by the battleship *HMS Warspite*, and in the battle that ensued the remaining eight German destroyers were sunk. Germany had lost virtually half of her entire destroyer fleet in just three days.

The hold on Narvik by Dietl's Gebirgsjäger now looked somewhat tenuous. Allied troops had been landed at Sjøvegan, some 40 miles from Narvik and these forces began closing in on the German occupiers. Dietl's troops were now faced by a total of 15,000 enemy troops, a mixture of French, British, Polish and Norwegian. The perimeter defended by the German force was gradually squeezed smaller and smaller and the situation for Dietl's forces began to look precarious. A small amount of supplies was dropped by parachute, and indeed a number of Gebirgsjäger also



The light cruiser *Emden* in Oslo harbour, having disembarked the mountain troops it carried to Norway, one of whom leads a pack horse across the foreground.



Eduard Dietl, the 'Hero of Narvik', chats with his soldiers after the successful conclusion of the battle. The rare Heeresbergführer badge can just be seen on Dietl's right breast pocket.

volunteered to be dropped by parachute into the enclave whilst yet more mountain troops from 2 Gebirgs Division set off overland from Trondheim to the south to try to break through to their beleaguered comrades. By 27 May, Narvik had been retaken by the Allies and Dietl's force pushed to the east of the town. The situation was becoming desperate and although the relief force was by now only a few kilometres away, Dietl's small force was being squeezed into an ever decreasing perimeter and on the point of being overwhelmed. Hitler had given Dietl permission to act on his own initiative and, if he felt it necessary, to abandon his positions and take his troops over the border into neutral Sweden and internment. Dietl was confident that his men would hold out to the last and refused to give up what his men had sacrificed so much to hold. With the fall of France imminent, however, the British decided to abandon attempts to hold Norway. On 4 June, British units began to withdraw and by 8 June had

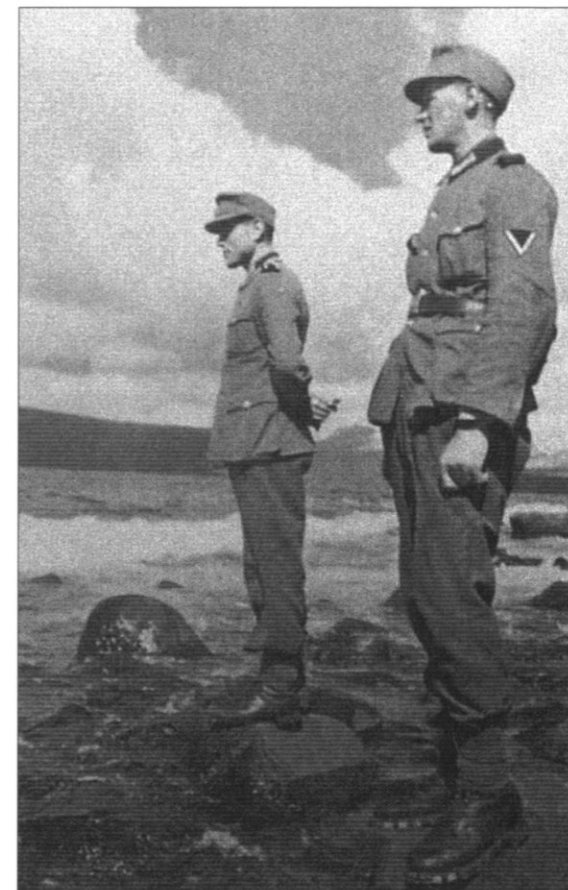
A Jäger and a Gefreiter from Gebirgsjäger Regiment look out over the waters of Narvik Fjord after the fighting had ceased. Note once again the lack of Edelweiss badge on the Bergmütze.

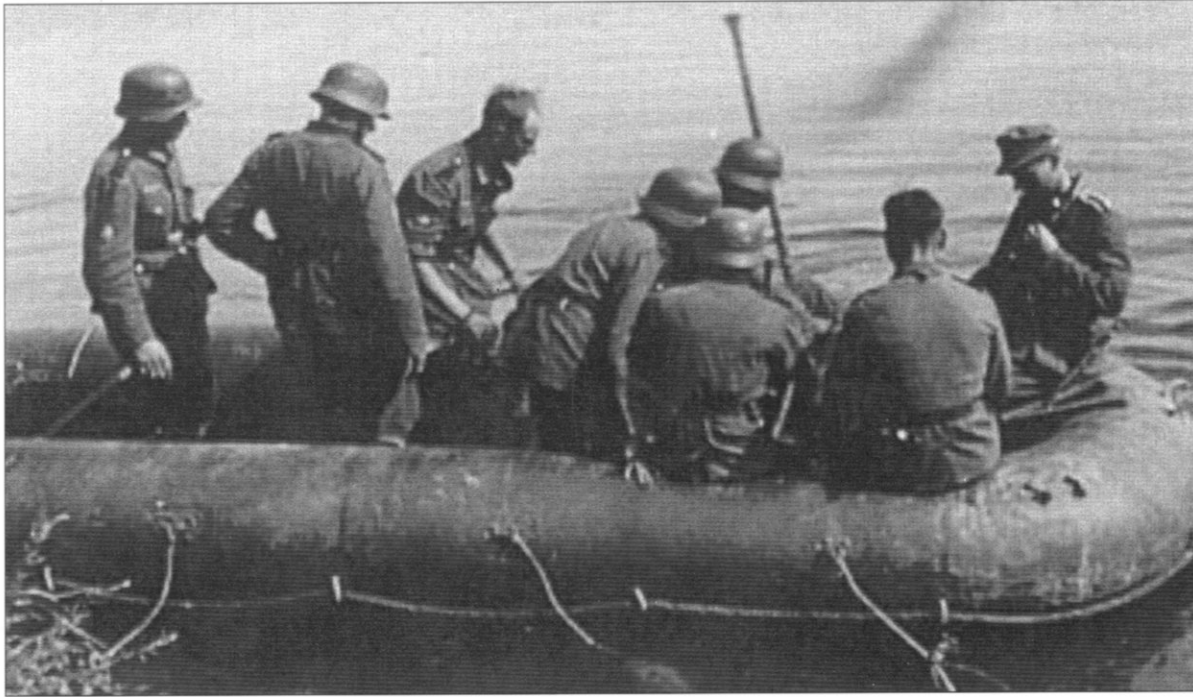
abandoned Narvik to the Germans. Eduard Dietl was fêted as the hero of the hour, and in recognition of the performance of the Navy, the Gebirgsjäger and the Luftwaffe, which had battled to keep them supplied, a new decoration was created, the Narvik Shield. Once again the Gebirgsjäger had proven themselves to be worthy of inclusion in Germany's military élite.

France

On the launching of the campaign in the west, 1 Gebirgs Division was tasked with advancing to the Maas and initially found itself making excellent progress with no enemy opposition to speak of. Not until 18 May did the unit first make contact with enemy. Near Signy enemy tanks appeared and attacked the Gebirgsjäger. A spirited response from the mountain troops saw them pursue the

A field 'office' during the campaign in France. The NCO facing the camera wears two braid rings on each sleeve, indicating his position as *Der Spiess*, the unit senior NCO, in this case an Oberfeldwebel.





Gebirgs Pioniere preparing a rubber assault boat for a crossing of the River Seine, France, 1940. The Edelweiss badge on the sleeve of the soldier at extreme left and the Bergmütze worn by the Unteroffizier at extreme right allow these troops to be positively identified as Gebirgsjäger.

enemy tanks into the woods and return with a significant number of prisoners together with captured tanks. The division then pressed on to the heavily defended Oisne/Aisne Canal, which it crossed on 5 June. Pushing aside the French colonial troops defending the south bank the division, and in particular 99 GJR, took some heavy punishment but doggedly continued its advance, and at Pont St Mard defeated an attempted counter-attack by Moroccan troops. By now, 1 Gebirgs Division was making better progress than the units on its flanks, and was in an exposed position. Despite the dangers, the feeling that the French were now beginning to lose heart drove the Gebirgsjäger onwards and on 6/7 June they crossed the Aisne. In the pell-mell pursuit of the retreating French, smaller, more determined, pockets of resistance were simply by-passed. The mountain troopers raced onwards and on 11 June crossed the Marne. The division was then sent southwards to attack French units that were holding the southern front against attempted incursions by Italian troops. Within days French resistance collapsed and on 19 June an armistice was agreed, with the French government capitulating on 25 June. The Gebirgsjäger were then tasked with carrying out occupation duties on the Franco-Swiss border. Towards the end of the campaign in the west, the newly formed 6 Gebirgs Division arrived at the front, but was too late for involvement in any major actions and was employed on occupation duties.

Greece/Balkans

After the decision to abandon Operation Sea Lion, the invasion of Great Britain, Hitler's interests turned towards the east once again and the inevitable conflict with the Soviet Union. Much to his annoyance, his Italian ally Mussolini had let his own vainglorious ambitions draw him into conflict in the Balkans, with an attack on Greece, and this had seen

British troops arrive on the scene to support their Greek allies. Hitler knew he would have to secure the Balkans before launching his attack on Russia and thus initiated a new plan, Operation Marita, to eliminate any threat to his southern flank.

Negotiations were concluded with Bulgaria to allow German troops to transit through its territory for the attack on Greece. 5 Gebirgs Division marched through the Bulgarian lowlands and up into the high mountain border with Greece, in preparation for the invasion. It was still winter in the mountains and the Gebirgsjäger faced terrible conditions as they awaited the attack order in the high, exposed peaks.

5 and 6 Gebirgs Divisions were tasked with breaking through the Metaxas Line. These defensive fortifications were modern, powerful, and manned by first-rate troops. Extensive new trench systems and widespread barbed wire entanglements had been created and a fanatical resistance was expected from the Greek troops. The Gebirgsjäger were to operate in small assault teams. Fortunately for the Germans, on 5 April, the morning of the attack, a thick mist shrouded the area giving excellent cover and helping to deaden sound. Initial Greek outposts were swiftly overcome and prisoners taken but the defenders soon realised they were under attack and laid down heavy defensive fire. The Germans then opened up with mortars and the Gebirgs Artillerie, which had been literally manhandled into position up in the mountains, the artillery being supported by dive-bombing attacks by Junkers 87 'Stuka' bombers. However, many of the pillboxes of the Metaxas Line survived these bombardments and only fell after determined and costly individual assaults by the Gebirgsjäger. Often these bunkers were

British prisoners rounded up by Gebirgsjäger prepare for the long march into captivity.



connected by tunnels and in such positions that one bunker could give covering fire to another under attack. The Greek defenders were excellent soldiers who, in many cases, refused to surrender and fought on to the death. In some cases, the Greeks even left their trenches and successfully counter-attacked the Germans or, from the safety of their concrete bunkers, called down artillery fire on their own positions to rid themselves of the Germans outside.

Eventually, individual strongpoints fell to the determined attacks of the Gebirgsjäger, and with gaps appearing in the defence line, the Germans were able to force their way through, surrounding and isolating the positions they could not overcome. In many cases, the German attackers were so impressed at the gallantry and determination of the Greek troops that they allowed the Greeks to surrender with military honour.

Once Rupesco, the last main strongpoint, fell the Gebirgsjäger were able to flow out onto the lower slopes and rapidly advance on Salonika, which fell in April. Progress thereafter was rapid and the Greek forces and their British allies inexorably pushed back towards numerous parts of the Peloponnesus from where the British evacuated the remnants of their forces. Athens fell on 26 April and the Greek campaign ended with the Gebirgsjäger having done much to enhance their already considerable reputation.

Whilst 5 and 6 Gebirgs Divisions had been involved in the campaign in Greece, 1 and 4 Gebirgs Divisions were racing through Yugoslavia, the former launching its attack from Austria and the latter from a start point in Bulgaria. Though the divisions never faced serious opposition during the campaign, their troops received considerable praise for the efficiency and speed of their operations. Long distances were being covered by forced march on foot, the luxury of lorry travel not being available. Though grateful for the low level of casualties, the Gebirgsjäger were exhausted by the end of the 12-day campaign.

Following the successful conclusion of the battle for Greece, 5 Gebirgs Division was allocated to the forces being marshalled for the invasion of Crete, Operation Merkur, in support of the Luftwaffe's Fallschirmjäger.



Gebirgsjäger during the battle for Crete, the regulation field-grey wool mountain trousers having given way to lightweight cotton shorts.



Gebirgsjäger pose alongside a knocked out British Matilda tank. Although under-gunned, the Matilda had thick armour and would still pose problems to the lightly armed mountain troopers.

The mountain troops were to be transported in two waves, one by air and, because of a serious shortage of transport aircraft, the other by sea. Not only was there a shortage of aircraft, but ships too were in short supply. General Ringel was forced to resort to commandeering whatever vessels he could find, including a fleet of some 20 Greek fishing boats or 'caiques'. On their way to the island the slow-moving convoy of fishing boats came under attack by British destroyers. Of the two battalions of Gebirgsjäger that set sail, only 52 men survived the naval action in a fit state to take part in the battle, over 500 being killed and many injured.

Reinforcements were desperately needed for the Fallschirmjäger who were making little headway against the island's British, Australian and New Zealand defenders. The loss of the seaborne battalion meant that reinforcements would have to be flown in to airfields still under enemy fire. By 22 May the equivalent of a full battalion of mountain troops had been landed and the German position on the island began to improve. The forces available to General Ringel were split into three Kampfgruppen, one Gebirgsjäger unit to hold the town of Maleme, one Fallschirmjäger unit to hold the area to the east of the town, and a third, Gebirgsjäger, unit to ascend into the White Mountains and advance eastwards towards Platanias. Despite the spirited defence put up by the New Zealanders holding the area, during which hand-to-hand fighting occurred, the Gebirgsjäger pushed forward relentlessly.

Meanwhile, yet more Gebirgsjäger were being landed and as German strength grew, Ringel launched a frontal attack against Galatas with one battlegroup whilst another outflanked the enemy position to prevent reinforcements reaching them. Once again, the New Zealand troops put up a ferocious defence but were gradually overwhelmed. The rest of the island now lay within the Germans' grasp and the Allied defenders were pushed back, fighting a determined rearguard action all the way. Many allied troops were evacuated by sea but when the island finally fell to the Germans on 31 May, over 7,000 went into German captivity. With the Balkans secured, Germany now turned its attention eastwards once again, and the Gebirgsjäger were to find themselves heavily involved in the opening moves of the new campaign.

The Russian Front - Southern Sector

1 and 4 Gebirgs Divisions were grouped together to form XLIX Gebirgs Korps, serving as part of 17 Armee in Heeresgruppe Süd. The two divisions had in fact been moved into their camouflaged assembly points several weeks before the opening of the campaign, and on the morning of 22 June 1941 crossed into Soviet-held territory and began the long march eastwards. With 4 Gebirgs Division on the right flank and 1 Gebirgs Division on the right, the Korps smashed its way through the eastern part of Poland, passing Cracow, and by mid-July had reached the fortifications of the 'Stalin Line' on the old Soviet-Polish border. Here the Gebirgsjäger met a much stiffer level of resistance but were more than up to the task of clearing the enemy-held bunker systems. In some places close quarter battle was joined, the mountain troops only making headway after severe hand-to-hand combat and with the Gebirgspioniere clearing the enemy out with flame-throwers. The advance of the Gebirgsjäger saw a sizeable salient being formed into enemy-held territory and the Germans were forced to endure numerous counter-attacks from the flanks of the salient. Nevertheless they doggedly continued to push forward, forcing the enemy back over the River Bug.

Crossing the Bug at Vinnitsa, the Gebirgsjäger pursued the retreating enemy, sometimes marching up to 50km a day as the German forces began to form a massive pincer movement which would eventually close around Uman. As greater and greater concentrations of Soviet troops were pushed back into the Uman pocket, so the German forces attempting to surround

and contain them were being stretched ever more thinly. Determined efforts were made by Soviet units, many with tank support, to break out of the containment. All of this was happening in poor weather conditions with extremely heavy rain, and the Gebirgsjäger were now suffering from overstretched supply lines, shortage of rations and, even more importantly, lack of ammunition. Despite this, the Gebirgsjäger fought off all attempts the enemy in their sector made to escape. One by one, the desperate Soviet troops had begun to surrender and by 8 August the battle was over. In excess of 100,000 enemy prisoners were taken, of which the Gebirgsjäger captured some 22,000, including three Soviet generals.

The mountain troops had little time to savour their victory and swung around to the south-east to continue their advance. By early September they were in the area around Berislav near the Sea of Azov. The advance then swung to the north-east, by Tokmak and Diakowo, to the north of Taganrog. The 1941 campaign in Russia had been a highly successful one for the Gebirgsjäger. Their next target, in July 1942, would be the Caucasus, and soon the mountain troops would be back in the conditions to which they were so well fitted.

As part of Heeresgruppe A, 1 and 4 Gebirgs Divisions would be fighting in Europe's highest

mountains, in a terrain which suited the defender far more than it did the attacker. German intelligence was able to provide only scant information on the terrain, but it was known then there were only a few suitable routes through the Caucasus range. Nevertheless, the Gebirgsjäger could not resist the temptation to detach a team of expert climbers to scale the heights of Mount Elbrus, the highest peak in the range at 5,663 metres, on the summit of which they proudly planted the German flag. Hitler is reputed to have flown into a rage when he heard of soldiers being detached from the advance to perform what he considered a pointless exercise.

As always, the mountain troops performed as well as had been expected of them, swiftly capturing the mountain passes in their sector, one Gebirgsjäger unit capturing a Soviet line which is reported to have consisted of over 2,000 individual defensive positions and seizing Mount Smaschko in the process. Having stormed their way into the mountains from the north the Gebirgsjäger faced massed enemy counter-attacks and were unable to break out into the lowlands to the south. As Soviet strength grew, the mountain troops came under increasing pressure but were refused permission to withdraw and consolidate. Apparently by November 1942 as many as three full Soviet Corps were facing the exhausted Gebirgsjäger. By now the winter held Russia firmly in its grasp. Temperatures plummeted and both men and pack animals were dying at an alarming rate because of the freezing conditions high in the Caucasus mountains. It was estimated that no man could last for more than 30 minutes in the open before suffering death by exposure. As both food and ammunition began to run out permission was finally granted for a withdrawal. Despite by now having lost all of their pack animals to exposure or starvation, the Gebirgsjäger gradually managed to recover all of their heavy artillery, using the pitifully few tractors they possessed; none was abandoned. Having escaped the freezing hell of the Caucasus, the mountain troopers moved not to a safe area behind the lines for rest and refitting, but instead were sent into positions in the swamps of the Kuban bridgehead which they successfully defended until the second half of 1943. By late October 1944, 4 Gebirgs Division had been pushed back in the general retreat to Hungary. 1 Gebirgs Division was removed from the Eastern Front in March 1943, and transferred into the Balkans where it remained, apart from a brief spell in reserve in Hungary, until December 1944.

The Russian Front - Northern Sector

On the outbreak of war with the Soviet Union the Army's 2 and 3 Gebirgs Divisions were committed to action in the northern sector of the front. In the far north Dietl's Gebirgskorps Norwegen would be tasked with taking Murmansk, whilst in the centre and southern parts of the sector, XXXVI Korps and the

A Gebirgsjäger in white snow camouflage (note also the white camouflage cover for the Bergmütze) shares a cigarette with captured Soviet soldiers, also well protected against the weather. This photo was taken in the far north of the Eastern Front in April 1942.



Generaloberst Dietl pays a visit to his troops in Finland, 1942.



A motorcycle combination from a Gebirgsjäger unit struggles through the snow-covered terrain on the Eastern Front. Note the Edelweiss tactical sign on the storage pannier on the front of the sidecar.



Finnish 3 Corps respectively would cut the supply routes that the Soviet forces needed to keep Murmansk supplied and reinforced.

On 18 June, the Germans began moving their troops to Finnish territory in preparation for the strike into the Soviet Union. This strike did not come at the same time as the main offensive, however, and it was not until a full week later, on 22 June, that the Gebirgsjäger began their push towards Murmansk.

The climate into which Dietl's troops struck was one of the most inhospitable on earth. The winter's barren, frozen tundra with little or no shelter was, in summertime, a mosquito-ridden, sodden bog, lashed by incessant summer rain. What appeared to be a reasonably short distance, especially when compared to the massive advances made by German troops in the central sector of the Eastern Front, of just 100km, from the Finnish border to Murmansk, presented the Gebirgsjäger with a formidable task. The advance petered out after just 40km. Unlike the situation on other sectors of the front, the Soviet troops here in the far

north were fanatically defending their territory and fighting to the last man. There were few usable roads across the boggy terrain and those which were passable came under regular attack by enemy aircraft. Dietl was also severely hampered by a shortage of supplies because the troops striking into central and southern Russia were given priority. A plan to renew the push, with a fresh attack on the Soviet defenders in July, failed when a dispatch rider carrying the plans was captured. Even though the details of the plan were altered, the enemy had been forewarned and massively reinforced their positions. The attack failed and was cancelled after a few days with little or no headway being achieved, though the Gebirgsjäger did successfully fend off a Soviet counter-attack almost immediately afterwards. A further attempt to overwhelm the Soviet defenders in September also failed.

As winter set in, 3 Gebirgs Division was pulled from the line and replaced by 6 Gebirgs Division, the latter now combining with 2 Gebirgs Division to form XIX Gebirgs Korps under General Schoerner. In February 1942, 7 Gebirgs Division arrived at the front and was paired with 6 SS Gebirgs Division *Nord* as XVIII Korps. The Soviet spring offensive of 1942 put paid to any chance of further progress on the Murmansk front, though once again the mountain troops successfully blunted the Soviet attack and in counter-attacks regained ground lost to the enemy in the first few days of their offensive.

With both sides exhausted, the front returned to a stalemate position with little more than patrol activity taking place over the coming months and throughout 1943.

By mid-1944 Finland was desperately looking for a way out of the conflict and in July signed a peace treaty with the Soviets. This left the German forces in the far north in an untenable position, and a long, hazardous retreat began, through Lapland and into Norway, harassed by attacks from Finnish troops.

Meanwhile, still in the northern sector of the front, Julius Ringel's 5 Gebirgs Division arrived from Crete in April 1942 and was committed to action on the Leningrad front. Put into the line along the Volkhov its task was to help prevent the escape of Soviet units trapped in the Volkhov pocket. The division was caught up in numerous vicious battles as the Soviets desperately fought to escape the encirclement.

When the Soviet forces finally surrendered, over 33,000 prisoners were taken. Thereafter, the division was set to work pursuing the many fragmented Soviet units which, rather than surrender, took refuge in the dense forests of the region. During the summer of 1943, the division was badly battered in fierce fighting around Lake Ladoga when the Soviet summer

Gebirgsjäger, on skis, seen here on the *Eismeerfront*. Such signposts, pointing out the distance to various towns and landmarks were popular sites for soldiers on campaign to have their photos taken.





Gebirgsjäger on the Leningrad Front. The terrain was so boggy that 'roads' made from the trunks of felled trees were laid to allow movement through this inhospitable land, made even worse by the prevalence of mosquitos.

offensive was launched. After fully 20 months in the swamps of the Leningrad Front, the division was finally withdrawn and transferred to the southern sector.

In early 1945, 1 Gebirgs Division was allocated to 2 Panzerarmee for the forthcoming offensive *Frühlings Erwachen*, an attack through the area around the River Drau and Lake Balaton to push the Red Army back through Hungary. The spring thaw and heavy rains had reduced the entire area to a sea of mud, and the German heavy armour found itself bogged down and unable to move.

On 7 March, 1 Gebirgs Division launched its attack and made excellent progress, unhampered by armoured and heavy equipment. The mountain troopers stormed through three separate Soviet defence lines and captured the town of Csomend. Soviet resistance rapidly stiffened and the Gebirgsjäger could make no further headway. Then, on 21 March, the Soviets launched a massive counter-attack which pushed the Germans back past their start point and all the way out of Hungary. During this period, 1 Gebirgs Division served many times as the bulwark of the German forces, holding back the Red Army whilst less capable units were withdrawn to safety. The mountain troops once again proved themselves to be of the highest calibre.

1 Gebirgs Division was withdrawn into the district of Styria in the south-east of Austria. Here, the exhausted Gebirgsjäger would form 6 Armee along with 117 Infanterie Division, and would face the Soviet 26 Army, pushing its way into Austria. Here, on 10 April, the Germans launched a counter-attack which saw 1 Gebirgs Division completely smash the Soviet 68 Guards Infantry Division and 135 Rifle Division, whilst the 117 Infanterie Division recaptured the town of St Kathrein at

the entrance to the pass through the Fischbacher Alps. When a subsequent Soviet attack saw 117 Infanterie Division cut off by the enemy, it was 1 Gebirgs Division which launched a successful rescue attempt. The actions were carried out in the most atrocious weather conditions, with snow blizzards, rain and heavy fog.

As the last few days of the war passed, it fell to 1 Gebirgs Division to once again provide a rearguard to protect those German troops desperately trying to reach the River Enns, on the west bank of which lay the relative safety of US captivity. The Gebirgsjäger defended the retreat successfully but with the result that most of them were captured by the Soviets; a captivity from which many of them never returned.

As well as fighting throughout Europe and the Balkans, a small number of Gebirgsjäger saw action in North Africa. One unit, Gebirgsjäger Regiment 756, was attached to 334 Infanterie Division in Tunisia in November 1942. The Gebirgsjäger were tasked with securing a hill on the outskirts of Medjez el Bab. The summit of this hill gave its occupants command of the road to Tunis.

The Gebirgsjäger held on to the hill until ousted by units of the British Guards Brigade. The Guards then relinquished control of the hill to troops of the US Army who were in turn promptly ejected once again in a counter-attack by the Gebirgsjäger. The British returned again and after fierce fighting retook the hill from the Germans. Once again the summit was handed over to US troops and once again retaken by the Gebirgsjäger in a counter-attack. Troops from the British 78th Division retook the hill for the third and final time just before the final German surrender in North Africa and the remaining Gebirgsjäger went into Allied captivity.

The interior of a mountain troopers' bunker on the far north of the Eastern Front. Glamour photos have been pinned up in an attempt to make this basic shelter a little more bearable.



The final fate of the Gebirgs Divisions was as follows:

1	Gebirgs Division	Surrendered to the Red Army, Austria, May 1945
2	Gebirgs Division	Surrendered to the US Army, southern Germany, May 1945
3	Gebirgs Division	Surrendered to Red Army, Silesia, May 1945
4	Gebirgs Division	Surrendered to Red Army, Slovakia, May 1945
5	Gebirgs Division	Surrendered to US Army near Turin, Italy, May 1945
6	Gebirgs Division	Surrendered to the British, Norway, May 1945
7	Gebirgs Division	Surrendered to the British, Oslo, Norway, May 1945
8	Gebirgs Division	Surrendered to the US Army, Italy, May 1945
9	Gebirgs Division	Surrendered in part to US and in part to the Red Army, Semmerring Pass, May 1945

In addition to these regular mountain troops, in 1942 the Army also created a number of Hoch-Gebirgsjäger-Bataillonen. These were specialist units established around a cadre of men who were particularly experienced in operating in the very highest peaks; all were expert mountaineers.

The first, Hochgebirg-Jäger-Bataillon 1, was formed in Berchtesgaden in July 1942 and its personnel allocated as specialists throughout the various sub-units of 1 Gebirgs Division.

Hochgebirg-Jäger-Bataillon 2 was formed in Innsbruck in mid-1942, and was eventually despatched to the southern sector of the eastern front where its personnel were absorbed into Gebirgsjäger Bataillon 54, ultimately also operating with 1 Gebirgs Division.

Hochgebirg-Jäger-Bataillon 3 was formed in November 1943 from personnel serving with Gebirgsjäger Bataillon 98. It served in northern Italy, ultimately attached to 114 Jäger Division.

Hochgebirg-Jäger-Bataillon 4 was also formed in November 1943 from Gebirgsjäger Bataillon 98 personnel. It too served in Italy, seeing action at the battle of Monte Cassino. It was subsequently absorbed into Gebirgsjäger Regiment 296.

The Russian Front in 1942 as Gebirgsjäger examine two knocked-out T-34 tanks. These tanks came as a nasty shock to the Germans and were far superior to most German tanks in the first part of the war in the east.



The Waffen-SS Mountain Troops

The combat record of the SS mountain troop units could hardly be more different to that of their Army counterparts. The Army's mountain troops were elite soldiers, fighting predominantly against regular combat troops and distinguishing themselves time and time again. The Waffen-SS Gebirgsjäger were, in the main, effectively security units created to combat the threat from partisans in the occupied areas. As such, they fought in the type of war where it was often the case that no quarter was given by either side and stories of atrocity abound.

The first Waffen-SS mountain troop unit to see action was 6 SS Gebirgs Division *Nord*. This unit had its origins in Norway, where on the surrender to Germany, there was a need to replace the Norwegian Army units guarding the country's border with the Soviet Union in the far north. With the build-up for Operation Barbarossa, it was not felt appropriate to commit front line army mountain troops to this area and so the task fell to two regiments of the SS-Totenkopfverbände which were subsequently renamed as SS-Kampfgruppe *Nord*. With the invasion of Soviet Russia, this unit was committed to action on the Leningrad front where it performed poorly and suffered very heavy casualties, principally due to poor training. It was withdrawn from the front and sent to Austria for intensive training and expansion, being re-formed as a Gebirgs Division. Returning to the Eastern Front in August 1942, their performance was significantly improved having now received proper training and the attachment of a volunteer battalion of Norwegian ski-troops (SS-Skijägerbataillon *Norge*). They remained in the far north of the Eastern Front in constant action until the autumn of 1944 when they were withdrawn through Norway and Denmark into Germany. From here, at the end of that year they were committed (considerably understrength) to the Ardennes Offensive and the subsequent Operation Nordwind, the unit being fragmented and pushed back by US forces. The remnants of the division surrendered in Bavaria in April 1945. By then its poor early performance had been greatly improved upon, although it never gained the elite status of many other Waffen-SS units. It was the only Waffen-SS Gebirgs Division to see significant involvement against front line units of the western Allies.

SS Mountain Troops and the Partisan War in the Balkans

Following the German invasion of the Balkans it quickly became apparent that significant military resources would have to be committed to subjugating the serious partisan activity that raged across the region. Fortunately for the Germans, the two largest partisan groups, the royalist Chetniks under Draz Mihailovic and the communist partisans under Josip Broz (Tito) spent as much time fighting each other as they did

Bosnian Moslem volunteers of the 13 SS Division *Handschar* wearing the distinctive fez permitted for wear by this unit. Note also the collar patch showing a hand holding a scimitar over a swastika. This unit's usefulness was at best questionable, though some of its German cadre staff were decorated with the Knight's Cross.



opposing the Germans. The Germans indeed often supported the Chetniks against the hated communists.

On 1 March 1942, a new mountain division, 7 SS Freiwilligen Gebirgs Division *Prinz Eugen* was formed. Recruited from ethnic Germans and with a substantial number of Romanians and Austrians, the division struggled to meet its volunteer status and before long conscription had to be used to bring the numbers up to requirement.

The unit was equipped to a large degree with captured enemy weapons and was the only mountain unit to make significant use of armour. The unit was deemed ready for active service in October 1942. Its two first major operations, *Unternehmen Weis* (Operation White) in March 1943 and *Unternehmen Schwarz* (Operation Black), in April/May 1943 took place around Bihac, Pterovak, Zagreb and into western Montenegro. However, the operations were to achieve only limited success. Later that year, *Prinz Eugen* took part in the disarming of Italian units in the Balkans after Italy's surrender to the Allies before returning to anti-partisan operations.

After a brief respite for rest and refitting *Prinz Eugen* was committed to *Unternehmen Rösselsprung*, an attempt to capture the communist partisan leader, Tito. *Prinz Eugen* operated alongside SS-Fallschirmjäger Bataillon 500 as well as German and Croat units, its main task being to seize partisan supply and ammunition dumps and hold key areas around Drvar to prevent the partisans' escape whilst the SS paratroops dropped into the main partisan stronghold to seize Tito. Although the operation was well carried out, Tito had left the area a few days earlier and all that was captured was one of his uniforms.

In August 1944, *Prinz Eugen* encountered units of the Red Army for the first time, and as might have been expected, it suffered badly when facing hardened Soviet combat troops. In September, it was one of several units used to provide cover for German troops retreating through Macedonia. It performed its tasks well, but once again suffered heavy losses as it was gradually pushed back across the River Drina.

By early 1945, the division was fighting both the Red Army and the partisans around Vukovar as it continued its retreat.

Somewhat surprisingly given the brutal nature of the partisan war in the Balkans, the division, rather than trying to fight its way westward to surrender to the western Allies, surrendered to Tito's partisans. Many of them were executed on the spot. Although the *Prinz Eugen* division could not be considered to be in the same class as many of the regular Waffen-SS divisions, when compared with the other SS mountain divisions, it was far from being the worst.

It was not only political differences that divided the communities in the Balkans. Ethnic and religious enmity contributed significantly to the hatred between various communities and, regrettably, still does today.

Himmler favoured the concept of raising a division of Bosnian Moslem volunteers to fight Tito's partisans, who derived mainly from the Christian Serb population. First suggested in 1942, the division was not finally brought into being until the spring of 1943. Amazingly, in view of Himmler's bizarre racial beliefs, this Moslem unit was permitted to have its own religious teachers (Imams), religious services and to wear traditional headgear (the fez). Not all of the divisional personnel were Moslem, some were Volksdeutsch, some German and even some Croat



SS-Gebirgsjäger from the *Handschar* Division. All wear the SS pattern camouflage smock, and all but one wear the Moslem fez. It is assumed that the soldier wearing the field cap is one of the German cadre element, though some Germans wore the fez also.

Catholics. The new unit was eventually entitled 13 Waffen-Gebirgs Division der SS *Handschar*. The name related to the scimitar featured on the divisional collar insignia.

Problems were encountered almost from the start. Many of the German training staff were 'old timers' raised in the SS ethos of German racial superiority, and treated the Moslem volunteers as the *Untermensch* that their own SS theorists had declared them to be not so long before. Not surprisingly friction between the Bosnians and their German trainers developed and during the period the division was based in France undergoing its basic training, a mutiny occurred. Several German officers were shot by the mutineers before the uprising was brought under control. The Germans lost no time in having the ringleaders executed. It is believed that the partisans had infiltrated many of their own into the new division specifically to foment unrest.

Handschar eventually went into action in the spring of 1944 and quickly gained an unsavoury reputation for excesses against the civilian population. It seemed that many members were as keen on settling old scores as they were on combating Tito's partisans. Ethnic confrontations in this region are still the cause of much unrest today. No doubt the fact that they were housed and fed, and were to some degree in a position to protect their own families had much to do with their own motivation for volunteering. Until the autumn of 1944, the division was almost constantly in action against partisans.

Discipline remained a serious problem even after the mutiny had been quashed and during one five-week period in August/September 1944 alone, it is estimated that over 2,000 of its troops deserted. By October, the Germans had had enough, and the order was given for all of the Bosnian volunteers to be disarmed and the manpower released put to work with one of the labour organisations. The remnants, based around the German and Volksdeutsche cadre, were formed into a Kampfgruppe which operated in the southern sector of the Eastern Front, taking part in the fighting retreat through Hungary. After the

removal of the untrustworthy elements, the remaining personnel fought well, a number of them winning the Knight's Cross. Those who survived the closing weeks of the war managed to make their way westwards and surrender to the British, avoiding the fate of so many Waffen-SS troops who fell into the hands of the partisans or the Red Army.

Following the 'success' of the Bosnian Moslem *Handschar* Division, came 21 Waffen-Gebirgs-Division der SS *Skanderbeg*. This unit was to be composed of Albanian Moslems from the Kosovo region, and recruitment began in the summer of 1944. A cadre of experienced officers and NCOs was transferred in from *Prinz Eugen*, along with a draft of suitable enlisted personnel from *Handschar*. Recruitment was slow, however, only around 6,000 volunteers coming forward and many of these being rejected as unsuitable.

One of the first actions this unsavoury unit was involved in was the rounding up of Kosovo's Jewish population for deportation. It was also implicated in atrocities against Serbian civilians in this area.

By the time the unit was first sent into action in October 1944, it numbered just under 1,500 men. Of that total less than 50 were the Albanian Moslems at whom the recruiting drive was aimed. Almost immediately, the unit was affected by a high level of desertions and it quickly became clear that it could never be viable as a combat formation. Accordingly, therefore, the unit was disbanded and those trusted cadre staff formed a Kampfgruppe which served within one of the regiments of the *Prinz Eugen* Division.

The next Gebirgs Division in the Waffen-SS Order of Battle was 24 Waffen-Grenadier (*Karstjäger*) – Division der SS, although chronologically this unit was in existence earlier than *Handschar* or *Skanderbeg*, being founded in 1942 when Himmler ordered recruitment of Germans, Austrians and Volksdeutsche from the Banat, Romania, Hungary and Yugoslavia. It is believed there were even a small number of Spaniards and Italians serving within the unit, the former having come from the Army's *Brandenburg* special forces unit. The unit name comes from the mountain peaks in the Istrian Peninsula, an area known as the 'Karst'.

Originally only a battalion, it was first based in the north of Italy and saw action predominantly against Italian communist partisans. Unlike some of its counterpart Waffen-SS mountain units, this battalion fought extremely well and achieved considerable success against the partisans.

In view of its excellent performance the decision was taken to increase the battalion to divisional status, and in the summer of 1944 the expansion began. In the event, insufficient manpower was available and the unit was expanded only to brigade size. It saw heavy action against elements of the British 8th Army as well as the partisans and was gradually reduced in size through combat attrition. The surviving troops were eventually amalgamated into a Kampfgruppe with some troops from the Army, Police and *Prinz Eugen* Division. In the closing days of the war, the remnants fought their way back to the German border to surrender to British forces. It is reported that the very last shots of the war were fired in combat by men of the *Karstjäger*.

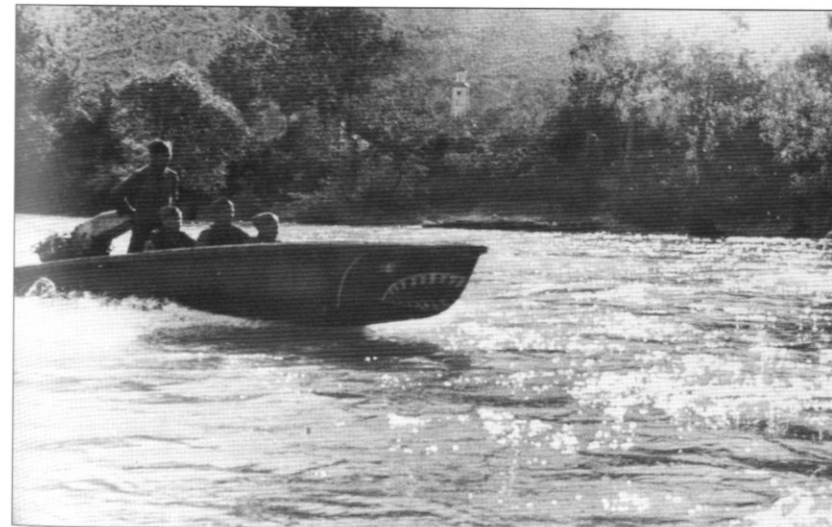
Two smaller Waffen-SS mountain troop units deserve mention. The Waffen-Gebirgs-Brigade der SS (Tartar Nr1) was raised in Hungary in June 1944. A cadre of German police personnel was to be supplemented by anti-communist Tartar volunteers who had fled from the Crimea

when the Germans were forced out of the region. Problems in organising uniforms and equipment delayed formation of the unit until September and there were severe reservations over the reliability of the Tartar volunteers. Within a few weeks, the decision was taken to disband the unit and merge its personnel with those in the Turkestani unit then being formed.

In the summer of 1944 a decision had been taken to create a Turkestani volunteer unit for the Waffen-SS, and existing Turkestani volunteers serving within the German Army, along with their German commanding officer were transferred en masse into the Waffen-SS. In addition, volunteers from Azerbaijan, Kirghistan, Uzbekistan and Tadzhikistan were absorbed into this new unit which took on the title *Ost Muslimanisches Division der SS* (Eastern Moslem Division of the SS).

During the unit's first combat action against partisans near Minsk, its German commander was killed by a bullet from a sniper's rifle. His replacement was also drafted in from the Army seemingly against his wishes. Discipline deteriorated dramatically under this unwilling commander and a mutiny broke out shortly thereafter. The commander had almost 80 of his men executed. Control was restored, but the commander's position was now untenable and with desertions becoming a serious concern, he was swiftly replaced by an officer from the Waffen-SS with the position of temporary commander.

During the suppression of the Warsaw Uprising in July 1944, these Moslem volunteers were attached to the infamous Dirlewanger Brigade, notorious for the hideous atrocities committed wherever it operated. Nowhere near sufficient recruits were forthcoming to bring the division up to its nominal strength. It underwent several name changes, finally becoming the *Ostturkischer Waffen Verband der SS*. It remained under Dirlewanger's control until October of 1944 when it was withdrawn into Slovakia. Thereafter its fate is uncertain but it is believed it was ordered to Italy in early 1945 and still suffering from high desertion rates its remnants disappeared in the general maelstrom of Germany's final defeat.



SS-Gebirgs Pioniere using fast assault boats in the campaign against Tito's partisans in the Balkans.

MUSEUMS AND RESOURCES

There are a number of museums that may feature Gebirgsjäger items within their collections, but as yet no special museum dedicated to these troops, so many will only be seen when the displays are rotated. Most museums only have a small part of their collection on display at any one time, and so being able to view mountain troop items may be a matter of luck.

Of particular interest are the collections of the Imperial War Museum in London (<http://www.iwm.org.uk>); the Wehrgeschichtliches Museum in Rastatt (<http://www.wgm-rastatt.de>); the Heeresgeschichtliches Museum in Vienna (<http://www.bmlv.gv.at>); and the Bavarian Army Museum in Ingolstadt (<http://www.bayerisches-armeemuseum.de>).

Re-enactment

In the last decade or so, interest in re-enactment has expanded rapidly with numerous 'living history' type groups emerging throughout Europe and more particularly in the USA. Many of these groups are highly dedicated and spare no effort to ensure absolute authenticity in appearance and behaviour.

Gebirgsjäger are well represented in the re-enactment community, and the following web-sites created with the re-enactor and mountain troops enthusiast in mind are excellent examples of their type, full of useful information and historical background. Because of their desire to achieve absolute authenticity, such sites will often give tips on day-to-day minutiae overlooked by other reference sources.

Die Gebirgstruppen. A superb site run by Peter Dennison and Patrick Kiser. Covers most aspects and includes some fine photos of original mountain troop memorabilia. Well laid out and designed. Even has a section on Gebirgsjäger music. <http://www.gebirgsjaeger.4mg.com/>

Gebirgsjäger Regiment 98. A re-enactment site with lots of useful historical information, details of uniforms, equipment etc. <http://www.reenactor.net/units/gjr98/1-gjr98-home.html>

Gebirgsjäger. An excellent site with details of uniforms, unit histories, organisation and combat histories of most units. <http://www.forces70.freemove.co.uk/Gebirgsjaeger/gebirghp.htm>

Collecting

In common with the memorabilia of most elite formations, Gebirgsjäger material is highly sought after and original pieces can fetch very high prices. Fortunately, original examples of the Gebirgsjäger special insignia itself, such as the cloth Edelweiss sleeve patch and metal cap badges, are quite easy to come by and moderately priced. Items such as collar patches and shoulder straps with the green piping of the mountain troops may also be encountered fairly frequently. However, complete untouched tunics with such factory insignia attached are very difficult to obtain, as are specific Gebirgsjäger items such as the Bergmütze. Unfortunately the market is replete with 'assembled' uniforms, which even if made up using original tunics and adding original insignia, do not have the desirability of an original unaltered piece. It is not only pieces made up from original parts which pose a danger to the collector, but outright fakes. One tailoring firm in

Germany manufactures tunics to original specifications using near exact modern equivalents of the original field-grey wool and copying original patterns exactly. Whilst such tunics may provide the perfect answer for re-enactors seeking authenticity, they are unfortunately often passed off as original. The same firm manufactures equally accurate peaked service caps, M43 field caps and mountain caps.

The field of badges and insignia is also one that requires great care. Extremely rare pieces such as the Heeresbergführer badge have been expertly faked post-war, and awards that have special significance for the Gebirgsjäger such as the Narvik Shield and Kreta cuffband have been reproduced for at least 50 years.

All of these problems apply even more so when considering Waffen-SS mountain troop items. In most cases they are even rarer than their Army counterparts and even more widely faked, special unit insignia such as collar patches, cuffbands, etc, being a particular favourite for forgers.

Unfortunately there is no easy answer for those who wish to include Gebirgsjäger memorabilia in their collection, other than to exercise extreme caution with almost any item being considered and only to buy from reputable sources who offer a money back guarantee of originality. Every effort should be made to study as many of the huge number of published reference works on militaria as possible as well as the many on-line resources for those with access to the internet.

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GLOSSARY

- Bergmütze** Mountain Cap
- Berghose** Mountain Trousers
- Feldbluse** Field Blouse, Tunic
- Gebirgsjäger** Mountain Rifleman
- Gebirgstruppen** Mountain Troops
- Gebirgs Division** Mountain Division
- Gebirgs Korps** Mountain Corps
- Gebirgskanone** Mountain Canon
- Gebirgshaubitze** Mountain Howitzer
- Gebirgspioniere** Mountain Engineers
- Gewehr** Rifle
- Handschuhe** Gloves
- Jäger** Rifleman, Private Soldier
- Kampfgruppe** Battle Group
- Karabiner** Carbine
- Schi** Ski
- Stahlhelm** Steel Helmet
- Steigeisen** Crampon
- Tornister** Back Pack
- Windjacke** Wind Jacket

COLOUR PLATE COMMENTARY

A: NORWAY, 1940

Plate A shows a young mountain troop enlisted man c.1940. He wears typical uniform and equipment items of this period. His tunic is the M36 pattern *Feldbluse* made from quality material with a high wool content. Expensive to manufacture, this garment was gradually simplified, and the introduction of cheaper material with a high shoddy content resulted in the M43 *Feldbluse* seen in Plate H. His shoulder straps and collar are cut in a dark green contrasting wool. Both collar patches and shoulder straps have the distinctive green *Waffenfarbe* of the mountain troops. He wears mountain trousers and heavily studded and cleated mountain boots with wool puttees.

Headgear is the distinctive *Bergmütze* with the metal *Edelweiss* insignia on its left side, a motif repeated in cloth form on his right sleeve. He carries a heavily laden rucksack and a Mauser Kar98k rifle, the standard weapon of the German infantryman.

Inset are shown several of the most significant insignia of the *Gebirgsjäger*:

- 1 Enlisted man's collar tabs showing the green centre stripe of the *Gebirgsjäger*.
- 2 The *Edelweiss* cap and sleeve insignia. The small stemless *Edelweiss* was worn on the peaked cap.
- 3 The Narvik campaign Shield.
- 4 The standard enlisted and NCO belt buckle, combat versions of which were usually in green-painted steel.
- 5 The Mauser Kar98k, one of the most widely produced bolt-action rifles ever.
- 6 The P.08 'Luger' Pistol, an excellent weapon but over-engineered and prone to jam if not kept perfectly clean.
- 7 The standard issue Bayonet or *Seitengewehr*.
- 8 The rare *Heeresbergführer* badge for expert mountain leaders.
- 9 The one-of-a-kind special honour dagger presented to Eduard Dietl by the German Navy to commemorate the successful battle at Narvik.

B: TRAINING

Here we see a mountain trooper undergoing training in one of the essential skills required for service in mountainous terrain, abseiling. As well as allowing the soldier to descend extremely steep or vertical faces very fast, it was an efficient method of evacuating injured soldiers, using a specially designed stretcher, or in the case of less severe injuries, on the back of the abseiling soldier.

Here we see one soldier on a rock ledge guiding the rope as the trainee descends. At the base of the rock face, a training NCO and the soldier's company commander observe his progress. The NCO wears the badge of an expert mountaineer. The badge was awarded regardless of rank or status, and depended only on the wearer having developed the highest level of mountaineering skills, and may be seen in wartime photographs being worn by soldiers from junior NCO rank up to full General.

C: WINTER WARFARE

Here we see a range of the special winter clothing worn by mountain troops. Some of these garments were specific to

the mountain troops whilst others were general issue throughout the armed forces. Of course, many of the high altitude areas that the *Gebirgsjäger* operated in demanded warm winter clothing even in summer time.

- 1 The Wind jacket. This double-breasted windcheater was worn over the field blouse. Slanted side pockets allowed access to the field blouse worn underneath.
- 2 The Anorak. This pullover garment was made in field-grey reversible to white. It was worn over the field blouse. It was used as a method of cutting down wind-chill, and was not in itself a particularly warm garment. It had a built-in hood, and a 'tail' which passed through the wearer's legs to button at the front. It also had pockets on the rear of the garment. Also shown here is the white snow camouflage cover on the *Bergmütze*.
- 3 Greatcoat. The standard army greatcoat would not be worn much when actually moving through the mountains due to its cumbersome nature, but on guard duty, often with the Anorak worn over it, was all that was available until the introduction of the special padded winter suit.
- 4 A special white woollen balaclava-type head covering was also produced as was the standard field-grey woollen Toque, a tube of wool simply pulled over the head and shown here worn with a whitewashed snow-camouflaged steel helmet.
- 5 The padded winter suit was camouflaged on one side, reversible to white, and consisted of a double-breasted warm jacket with built-in hood. A drawstring was provided at the waist and the cuffs were adjustable. Matching overtrousers were provided with flapped button-down fly. The trousers legs had drawstring adjustments at the bottoms. Padded mittens and a padded hood completed the outfit.
- 6 In cold weather large felt overboots were provided which could be worn over the soldiers' regular boots and helped to avoid frostbite.

D: MOUNTAINEERING EQUIPMENT

Here we see some of the mountaineering equipment used by the *Gebirgsjäger*. Many of these items, though military issue, were of course similar or in some cases identical to those long used by peacetime mountaineers and had merely been adopted for military use.

- 1 The military issue ice-axe featured a steel pick-axe head fitted to a long wooden shaft, with a leather wrist strap attached.
- 2 The ice hammer. A heavy mallet-type head was fitted to a short wooden shaft, again with a wrist strap fitted. Used for hammering in pitons.
- 3 Pitons. The pitons were strong steel spikes with a hole at one end through which could be fed a carabiner hook. The pieces of equipment were little different to those used for decades before and since.
- 4 Skis. Wehrmacht military issue skis were made from wood with a white finish and had a green stripe down the centre. They featured the usual footplate in the centre to which the wearer's mountain boots could be firmly attached.
- 5 Crampons. Steel spiked crampons for moving over ice fields were attached to the soles of the wearer's mountain boots by canvas tapes.

6 Sun goggles. Two principal types of sun goggles were used. Typical goggles had green lenses, with an elasticated adjustable headband. For use in extreme conditions, metal lenses could be used which allowed vision only through a pattern of tiny slits.

7 Snow shoes. A variety of different patterns of snow shoes were manufactured, some round, some oval but all of a similar style of manufacture. Note also the small pad type shoes which could be attached to the end of the bipod legs of an MG34 or MG42 machine gun.

8 Cable Layer. Communications in the high peaks were often problematic and signals personnel played an important role in such circumstances. Cable laying equipment like this reel holder used for laying field telephone cable was an important part of the *Gebirgsjäger* inventory.

E: TROPICAL SERVICE

As well as the frozen peaks of Norway and the Caucasus, and the barren tundra of the Leningrad Front, *Gebirgsjäger* also fought in the searing heat of North Africa, Italy and on the island of Crete. Here we see a mountain trooper as he may have appeared during the battle for Crete. Although he wears the field-grey wool tunic and *Bergmütze* used in cooler climes, the heavy wool mountain trousers have been discarded in favour of lightweight cotton shorts more appropriate to the Mediterranean heat. He still wears mountain boots, but with socks turned down over the top of the boots rather than puttees.

An NCO squad leader, he is armed with an MP40 machine pistol. The inset shows (1) The regulation olive-coloured cotton tropical tunic worn by mountain troopers in North Africa. As well as with shorts, the garment could be worn with matching breeches (2) or long trousers (3). One of the most popular of tropical garments was the peaked field cap (4), its long peak giving more shade to the eyes than the shorter peak of the *Bergmütze*. Troops serving in tropical climates usually wore belts and straps made from lightweight webbing rather than the more traditional black leather.

F: CAUCASUS, 1942

Here we see a *Gebirgs Artillerie* unit moving up into the high mountains. On the plain, small half-tracks, trucks or horses would be used to tow such artillery pieces. Narrow mountain paths, however, could not accommodate vehicles, or indeed the fully assembled guns themselves.

A number of lightweight artillery pieces were made specially for use by mountain troops and the *Gebirgsjäger* made widespread use of both German-made and captured mountain guns. Mountain guns were manufactured in such a way as to be easily disassembled into component sub-assemblies, which could be transported on horseback, or as here, by pack mules.

In this case the mule train is carrying a *Gebirgskanone* which has been broken down into five parts, one mule carries the wheels, one the barrel, one the carriage, one the gun-shield halves, another the cradle for the barrel and others the ammunition cases. Inset is an illustration of the assembled gun (1), and also a unit level award to commemorate service in the Caucasus (2).

G: BALKANS, 1945

One of the most controversial units of the *Waffen-SS* consisted of Moslem volunteer mountain troops. Here we see a captured Titoist partisan being questioned by a number of troops from the *Handschar* Division. The camouflage smocks, M43 pattern tunics, mountain trousers and boots were all pretty much standard issue. Specifically identifying this bizarre unit are the very distinctive field-grey fez as headdress, complete with its SS eagle and death's-head insignia, and the special collar patch showing a hand holding a scimitar, the *Handschar* of the division's title, over a swastika. Covered by the camouflage smocks of the enlisted men but visible on the sleeve of the NCO is the national colours sleeve shield showing the red and white chequered shield of Croatia.

Dogged by disciplinary problems, including a mutiny and a high level of desertions (it is believed that Titoist partisans had infiltrated the division and actively fomented unrest), the division fought a particularly bitter war against the partisans, with both sides often showing a distinct unwillingness to take prisoners. This partisan, once his captors are satisfied they have extracted as much information as they can from him, is likely to be shot on the spot, an event which looks imminent from the demeanour of the NCO, and the pistol he has drawn from its holster.

Despite the extremely dubious reliability of the bulk of this division's personnel, its German cadre personnel performed surprisingly well, acting as a *Kampfgruppe* in action against Soviet units after the division was broken up, and earning five Knight's Crosses of the Iron Cross.

H: EASTERN FRONT, 1945

As the war draws to a close, our young enlisted man from Plate A has now reached the rank of *Feldwebel* and is a seasoned veteran. His tunic bears the Narvik Shield commemorating his part in that battle, and he has earned the Wound Badge, Infantry Assault Badge and Iron Crosses Second and First Class.

His tunic is now the inferior M43 pattern and his *Bergmütze* has now been replaced by the M43 *Einheitsfeldmütze*, with a significantly longer peak than his former headgear. His Kar98k rifle, has been replaced by the superb *Sturmgewehr* StG44, a high quality assault rifle to which the famous Kalashnikov bears a strong resemblance.

Shown inset are (1) the *Gewehr* 33/40, a modified Mauser design which was widely used by mountain troops, (2) variations on the rucksack used by mountain troops, (3) the late war M44 battledress-type tunic, which was introduced too late to have any chance of replacing the earlier M36 and M43 types to any great degree, (4) the haversack-type breadbag carried by every soldier showing a typical array of contents, including *Esbit* cooker, the fat dish for containing lard, butter or jam, cooker fuel tablets, cigarettes, razor, scarf, comb, lice comb, socks, buttons and thread, just a few of the essentials for life in the field for soldiers from all branches of the armed forces.

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