

The 15th Division of the Latvian Legion in the Fight on the Velikaya River (1 March–14 April 1944): A Case Study in Maintaining Fighting Power

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The chapter is a case study of one German Army Waffen SS division in a period of intensive combat on the Eastern Front. The division in question is the 15th Latvian SS Volunteer Division (hereinafter – the 15th Division), which was formally a part of the Waffen SS, but its formation, motivation and battle performance was different from what is usually known as the Waffen SS elite division. The 15th Division was composed of Latvian volunteers who fought less for Germany than against the Soviet Union. The 15th Division found itself in intensive combat in the northeastern sector of the Eastern Front in March and April 1944. The 15th Division was one of several dozen divisions of the Wehrmacht that were manned by non-German nationals. The combat effectiveness of these non-German divisions varied widely – from exceptional battle performance to thoroughly unfit to fight. Because the non-German formations were such a large part of the Wehrmacht's personnel, especially in the last two years of World War II, an understanding of the dynamics of such units and what made them effective in battle – or not effective – is important to gain a balanced picture of the Wehrmacht in those years.

The question of what makes units effective or ineffective in combat is one that is central to the subject of military history. An understanding of combat effectiveness, and how combat effectiveness is maintained, requires the examination of many factors. Leadership and training play a key role. The system of medical care and the timely replacement of wounded or dead soldier are all factors, as are the psychological conditions such as the troop motivation and morale over time. Logistics and support are other factors that contribute to a unit's fighting power. In short, there is no simple formula or case study to explain how a military unit maintains its effectiveness in high intensity combat. There are cases in which units faced intense combat and took heavy losses and were still highly effective at the end of the battle. There are also cases of units that saw light combat and suffered few casualties, but were rendered combat ineffective in short order.

Hopefully, a case study of the 15th Latvian Division will provide some insights into the conditions of the non-German Wehrmacht units that saw intensive fighting in 1944 and how the fighting power of such units was maintained, or not maintained. A case study of the 15th Division will likely provide some answers on the

conditions of fighting on the Eastern Front and the experiences that non-German divisions had.

Formation of the 15th Waffen SS Division, Latvian Legion

On January 23, 1943 Adolf Hitler gave verbal permission to *SS Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler to establish the Latvian SS Volunteer Legion.¹ Himmler on January 24, after returning from a visit to the Eastern Front, sent a radio message to the 2nd SS Infantry Brigade, and ordered it to use the 19th and 21st Latvian Police (up to 1943 called *Schutzmannschaft*) Battalions as the initial cadre for the Latvian SS Volunteer Legion. The initial plan was to create a regiment sized unit with three infantry battalions and to transfer the unit from the Order Police (*Ordnungspolizei* or Order Police) to the *Waffen SS*. The reason behind this decision was to form new military units made up of the inhabitants of the occupied European countries. When the German offensive on the Eastern front faltered, and especially after the defeat at Stalingrad in winter 1942–43, the earlier guidelines set by Hitler that only Germans could be armed were changed. The increasingly depressing manpower picture pushed the Germans to recruit and even conscript non-Germans into the *Wehrmacht* in large numbers. The Latvians were in a more favorable position than some nations because they were considered more northern than eastern European, and thus more acceptable on the lines of German racial theory.

Only on January 27, 1943 did the local “Self-Administration of the Land” (*Landeseigeneselbsverwaltung*) of Latvia officially hear of the decision to form the Latvian Legion. At the same time it was generally known among the Latvian population, who had lived under the German occupation since June 1941, that the German occupation authorities planned to begin the mobilization of young Latvians for various military organisations (*Waffen SS*, *Wehrmacht*, *Reichsarbeitsdienst*). The possibility of spreading Latvian recruits among German military units had generated a lot of anxiety in the Latvian community, so the founding of the Legion was conceived as an opportunity to partially protect the interests of Latvian soldiers. After initial negotiations Adolf Hitler’s formal written order on the formation of the Legion was issued on February 10. The new plan called for the creation of as many units within the *Waffen SS* as possible. It was agreed to form one infantry brigade near Leningrad from six Latvian Police battalions already on the frontline there and one infantry division in Latvia from Latvian recruits and former Latvian Army officers. Although, the Legion was formally announced to be voluntary, in reality the principle of voluntary participation was not implemented.

1 For the general history of the Latvian Legion see Arthur Silgailis, *Latvian Legion* (Riga, 2006); Andrievs Ezergailis (ed.), *The Latvian Legion. Heroes, Nazis, Victims?* (Riga, 1997); R.J. Bender and H.P. Taylor, *Uniforms, Organization and History of the Waffen-SS*, Vol. 5 (San Jose, 1982); Edvīns Brūvelis etc. *Latvian Legionnaires* (Riga, 2004).

On February 15, 1943 *SS-Führungshauptamt* (SS-FHA) issued an order for the formation of the Latvian SS Volunteer Division. On February 26 there followed a more detailed order on the new division now called the 15th Latvian SS Volunteer Division and on 24 May 1943 the SS-FHA appointed as division commander *SS Gruppenführer und Generalmajor* Carl Graf von Pückler-Burghauss. The division headquarters included German officers as well. A Latvian was given the position of division infantry commander, who also served as the Latvian liaison officer to division headquarters. Under German law, only a German citizen could serve as a division commander, so while the commander was German, the subordinate commanders were Latvians who were generally well-educated and experienced officers who had served with the pre-war Latvian Army. Latvian officers were assigned to serve as commanders of the division's regiments, battalions and companies. The 15th Division was created according to the German order of battle with three infantry regiments, each with two battalions, an infantry howitzer company, an anti-tank company, an artillery regiment with four battalions, a reconnaissance battalion, an engineer battalion and respective supply units.

The formation of the division went slowly as the planned conscription of men and officers in Latvia failed to proceed as planned. Thus, when the 34th Grenadier Regiment on 12 November 1943 received orders to depart for the front to the Novo-Sokolniki region most of the soldiers had on average of only 40-60 days of training.² In November and December 1943 the 15th Division commander's plan was to deploy all the division units to the immediate rear of the front in the Novo-Sokolniki region, where they would gain experience in active combat under the command of the German 205th and 83rd Infantry Divisions. By the end of January 1944 all units of the 15th Division had reached the front and the full division consisted of 15,192 men of all ranks. However, the rear area immediately behind the front did not allow for unit training or time to learn from the combat-seasoned German troops, because the Red Army immediately began attacks in the Novo-Sokolniki area. In early February 1944 part of the 15th Division was relocated to Redya River region some 200 km north, which was an inactive sector of the front. This was a means to gradually accustom the division's units to combat conditions. However, on 20 February 1944, due to the generally deteriorating situation of the German Army Group North, the 15th Division was ordered to pull back to the Velikaya River region where a new defence line, called the "Panther" position, was being prepared. Before the withdrawal began a new division commander was appointed on February 17, 1944, *SS Oberführer* Nikolaus Heilmann, who was a former police officer with only limited military experience.

2 Oskars Freivalds and Alfreds Janis Berzins (eds.), *Latviesu karavīrs Otrā pasaules kara laikā: Dokumentu un atmiņu krājums*, 4. vol. (Ministere, 1976), p. 64; see 15th Engineer Battalion daily orders, Latvian War Museum (Latvijas Kara muzejs, LKM) from 5 – 19633/1254 – DK to 5 – 19691/1312 – DK.

During the first four months of its frontline experience the 15th Division never fought as a whole unit, and even by the end of March 1944 some parts of the division had still not arrived. The plan to gradually accustom raw conscripts to the rigors of the Eastern Front proved impractical because by this time there were no longer any “quiet sectors”. In the next one and a half months the primary challenge for the division was to keep its combat and fighting power up.

On 4 March 1944 the actual strength (*Iststärke*) of the division consisted of 253 officers, 1,069 non-commissioned officers and 8,738 privates (in total – 10,060).³ The total number excludes the 34th Grenadier Regiment, 1st Battalion of the 33rd Grenadier Regiment and the 3rd Battalion of the 15th Artillery Regiment, which arrived the next week. According to the planned authorised strength (*Sollstärke*), the division should have had 14,710 personnel to be considered a well-manned division.⁴

On 1 April 1944, nearly one month later, the 15th Division’s actual strength (*Iststärke*) was 367 officers, 1,301 non-commissioned officers, 10,770 privates, as well as 850 privates in the 15th Reserve battalion (in total – 13,288).⁵ Despite the seemingly improved personnel situation the commander of the VIth SS Army Volunteer Corps (hereinafter VIth Corps) in his monthly report underlines that the infantry units of the 15th Division were battle incapable and without a period of basic training were fit only to provide new “cannon fodder” for the army.⁶ On this date the 15th Division was moved from the Velikaya River positions to a quieter sector for a period to restore its combat effectiveness. The grenadier regiments were first to be pulled out, and on 14 April they were followed by the division headquarters, and soon followed by the 15th Artillery Regiment. In the one and a half months of battle the division had lost its combat effectiveness even though the number of assigned soldiers had steadily increased. On the other hand, the fighting strength (*Gefechtstärke*) of the 15th Division on 1 March 1944 was 3,445 officers, and enlisted men. On 11 March the figure was 3,719 men, on 21 March 3,017 men, and on 1 April 2,702 men.⁷ The trends are noticeable. While the actual strength of the 15th Division (*Iststärke*) consistently increased, the frontline fighting strength (combat troops – *Gefechtstärke*), suffering the impact of casualties and replacements, decreased at the same consistent rate. Therefore, it is important to analyze the 15th Division’s actual casualty figures and their impact on the combat power as well as their cohesion and motivation (known as a fighting power) to understand the main reasons for the 15th Division’s apparent lack of success.

3 Weekly status report to the RF-SS, 4 March, 1944, Latvian State Historical Archive (Latvijas Valsts Vēstures arhīvs, LVVA), 296. f., 1. April 1. l., 181. lp.

4 Hans Stöber, *Die lettischen Divisionen im VI. SS-Armee Korps* (Osnabrück, 1981), p. 316.

5 War Diary entry, 1 April, 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. Apr., 1. l., 187 lp.

6 Stöber, *Die lettischen Divisionen*, p. 316.

7 Ten day status report for War Diary, LVVA, 296. f., 1. Apr., 1. l., 7 lp.

Combat power is here understood as the count of men, weapons and equipment. The archival records present precise numbers to show that in March and April 1944 the 15th Division was in the best shape of its existence. Neither before nor after would the 15th Division have more men, and artillery support, and self-propelled anti-tank guns. On a couple of occasions even air support had been available in this period. So, despite a personnel and equipment situation far better than for many units that remained combat effective, it is necessary to look at other factors for an explanation as to how the 15th Division lost its effectiveness in just a few weeks.

After the end of World War Two some theories were put forward to suggest that moral and psychological criteria should be used to determine why soldiers fight or fail to fight. In early 1980s a discussion began around the term “fighting power”, which was used to compare the performance of the respective armed forces during World War Two. The definition and understanding of “fighting power” used in this study is taken from Martin van Creveld and his book *Fighting Power*. As van Creveld noted, “an army’s worth as a military instrument equals the quality and quantity of its equipment multiplied by what ... will be termed its Fighting Power. The latter rests on mental, intellectual and organisational foundations; its manifestations in one combination or another are discipline and cohesion, morale and initiative, courage and toughness, the willingness to fight and the readiness, if necessary, to die. Fighting power in brief is defined as the sum total of mental qualities that make armies fight.”⁸ Martin van Creveld’s primary intent was to compare two different armies (the German Army and the US Army) and their respective organisations, traditions and replacement systems. Van Creveld found that, in general, the German Army was more effective. After the publication of *Fighting Power* a heated discussion began over which system was better – the American or German – and how better “mental qualities” can be achieved to maintain fighting power on the battlefield. These questions are still valid and the discussion is still going on.⁹ The author of this case study will only use the general concept of *Fighting Power*. In this case one must understand that there never was a single “German system”,

8 Martin van Creveld. *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939–1945* (Westport, 1982), p. 3.

9 See Michael D. Doubler, *Closing With the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944–1945* (Kansas, 1994); Keith Bonn. *When the Odds Were Even: The Vosges Mountains Campaign, October 1944–January 1945* (Reed, 1994); Peter R. Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*, (Lawrence, 1999); Robert S. Rush. *Hell in Hurtgen Forest: The Ordeal and Triumph of an American Infantry Regiment* (Lawrence, 2004); Omar Bartow, *Hitler’s Army: Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich* (New York, 1991); Christoph Rass, “Menschenmaterial” *Deutsche Soldaten an der Ostfront: Innenansichten einer Infanteriedivision 1939–1945* (Paderborn, 2003); Douglas E. Nash, *Victory Was Beyond Their Grasp: With the 272nd Volks-Grenadier Division from the Huertgen Forest to the Heart of the Reich* (Aberjona, 2008).

but rather a general system in which there were different practices and traditions that varied between units.

The battles by the Velikaya River are well known in Latvia today because after the World War one of the battle episodes was cited as the justification to establish a commemorative day for the Latvian Legion on 16 March. Despite this episode being cited, there is still considerable uncertainty about the course of combat and the losses, and the reasons for the losses. The information about this episode is primarily based on the participants' memories and fragmentary documents.¹⁰

The 15th Division war diary (*Kriegstagebuch*), which came into the possession of the Latvian State Historical Archives in 2006, is the most accurate source for accounting for the casualties of the 15th Division. The war diary is divided into several chronologically sorted volumes. Each volume consists of activities of the division and records are provided with references or appendices. The war diary includes duplicates or transcripts of operational documents. One important detail about the war diaries is the time the notes were written. Unfortunately, the war diary was not written as the fighting took place but was filled in afterwards with sometimes a long period between the activity and the writing of the notes and reports in the war diary. The 15th Division's war diary for the period 1 March to 14 April 1944 was composed after the division had been moved to the other frontline sector. The annex on casualties suffered at the positions near the Velikaya River was written by the division headquarters IIA/b section (Personnel) at the beginning of June, 1944. That the records were written later provides both benefits and detriments. On one hand, it is good that the diary is based on verified statements that allow re-evaluation of the 15th Division's activities near the Velikaya River, for example, the noted decrease in the actual number of casualties. On the other hand, when a diary or report is compiled well after the events it describes there is a tendency to "improve" the message, underlining the positive and omitting the negative. Thus, it becomes easier in hindsight to justify the bad decisions made. The credibility of the facts mentioned in the diary undermines the idea that there was a blind adherence to the orders. The orders that were issued impose strict deadlines, but the diary only seldom provides any reference to deadlines met or missed. The question is whether the orders were always carried out in a straightforward way or whether the conditions of the battle provoked some improvising. To properly understand documents compiled in the format of orders, eyewitness memories and personal diaries are irreplaceable. Research needs to also take into account these sources because they provide valuable additional information about the general situation that one cannot get from only using the official documents.

The activities of the 15th Division near the Velikaya River can be divided into three stages. The period from 1 March 1944 to the 25 March can be characterized

10 Arthur Silgailis, *Latvian Legion* (Riga, 2006), pp. 88–112; *Latviesu karavīrs*, 4 vol., pp. 139–93.

as medium intensity combat activity. During this time Red Army units carried out isolated attacks with modest aims to win better positions for further attacks. It is probably the best known stage of the campaign owing to the current commemoration of 16 March. The second stage of the campaign begins on 26 March and ends on 31 March. During this period the Soviet First Assault Army carried out a large scale attack over the Velikaya River and won an important bridgehead on the west bank of the river. As a result of the battle in less than a week the 15th Division suffered heavy losses and practically lost its combat effectiveness. In fact, leaving aside the consideration of the modern official remembrance day, the 26th of March had a substantial impact on the 15th Division in particular and the Latvian legion in general. The third stage of the campaign was from 1 April to 14 April. As the division had been declared incapable of combat, a gradual withdrawal from the frontline began in order to move the 15th Division to a quieter sector. However, also at this stage the division suffered considerable losses because the commander of the Soviet 2nd Baltic Front took advantage of the First Assault Army's success and intensified attacks from the newly won bridgehead and thus hindered the 15th Division's movement. This resulted in changing the planned redeployment of the 15th Division.

The First Stage of the Battle (March 1–25 March 1944)

During the first stage of the battle (1–25 March 1944) the 15th Division suffered the following officer casualties: 6 KIA, 10 WIA and 3 MIA. Casualties for NCOs and privates were 135 KIA, 411 WIA and 37 MIA.¹¹ At first glance these losses seem heavy. However they were not significantly higher than the losses in June when from 11 to 30 June the 15th Division lost: officers: 1 KIA, 7 WIA and MIA; and for NCOs and privates 77 KIA, 466 WIA and 46 MIA.¹² The total losses for March were 555 and for June 547. However, the share of irrevocable losses (the number of killed and missing) is different. The number of killed and missing is higher in March, but the amount of wounded is higher in June. This can be explained by the impact of weather conditions as the cold and snow of March led to a higher mortality rate for wounded soldiers. For the sake of comparison, during the same period in March the 19th Division lost 7 officers and 592 non-commissioned officers and privates.¹³ In fact, the total monthly loss of 500 to 600 soldiers could be considered an average number at this point of the war. With luck, if an army unit held positions along a truly quiet sector of the front the monthly casualties could drop to 200 soldiers, as shown by the 15th Division in May 1944 when it held the Bordovo – Kudever

11 Casualty Report from March 1 to March 31, 8 June, 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. Apr., 1. l., 185. lp.

12 Casualty Report from June 1 to June 30, 2 July, 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. Apr., 3. l., 130. lp.

13 *Latviesu karavīrs*, 4 vol., p. 153.

positions, and the 2nd Brigade in December 1943 when it held the Volkhov positions.¹⁴ Both of those sectors were regarded as quiet. The main difference lies in the emotional coloration of the facts. The memories of the battles near the River Velikaya always recount the heavy losses caused by the frontline movement from the west bank of the river to the east bank when they had to occupy unprepared positions. Despite these memories, the actual casualty numbers show that the loss rate was about the same as in the Bardovo – Kudevera battles when the division occupied well prepared positions in the summertime. The memoirs relating to the June battles usually describe a relatively calm period with some flickers of combat activity which often developed into fierce battles (for example, the “Janu kalna” battles). The losses on the east bank of the river were lower than the casualties after 26 March on the west bank of the river. The reason for this operation is explained by the wartime reality that is not described in the official documents. Although the actual loss rates were average, the losses were perceived as serious because there were few infantry units in the battle. The now commemorated battle of 16 March may serve as an example of this.

The Red Army began its expected attack on the morning of March 16 at 0640 with a massive artillery barrage. At 0700 the tank and infantry attacked Hill 93.4 and Saponovo Village. By 0710 the first Soviet tanks overran Saponovo. The 2nd Company (commander Second Lieutenant Krastins) of the 15th Reconnaissance Battalion was defeated and began to retreat towards Velikaya River. But the hardest hit unit was the 11th Company of the 43rd Grenadier Regiment which almost disintegrated. The Red Army began its attack with the newly arrived 23rd Guards Rifle Division. Two regiments attacked, the 66th Guard Infantry Regiment attacked Saponovo and the 68th Guards Infantry Regiment attacked Grigorkino. They were supported by First Assault Army’s 37th Tank Regiment. By 1100 Hill 93.4 was in enemy hands. But the Saponovo and Oshidkovo breakthrough attacks were slowed by the 43rd Grenadier Regiment’s 3rd Battalion’s Reserve Company counterattack and 15th Reconnaissance Battalion Commander’s decision to engage his reserve (one platoon).¹⁵

As early as 0705 the 15th Division’s reserve (32nd Grenadier Regiment’s 1st Battalion) received the order to be combat ready within 15 minutes and move to Novy Put. At this time the battalion had about 140 men. At 0950 at Novy Put the “Silgailis battle group” was organized using the 43rd Regiment’s 3rd Battalion, 32nd Regiment’s 1st Battalion and the 478th Antitank Battalion’s 3rd Company. The

14 Casualty Report from April 4 to July 18, 9 August 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 2. l., 242. lp.; *Die lettischen Divisionen*, p. 76.

15 War Diary entry for March 17 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. Apr., 1. l., 92. lp; Vilis Hazners to Arvids Kripens, 23 March 1944, Latvian War Museum (Latvijas Kara muzejs, LKM) 5 – 30798/ 1705 – DK ; Peteris Lapainis War Diary, entry for 17 March 1944, LKM 5 – 922 – DK/p.

battle group was supposed to launch an attack at 1210 and recover the lost ground. The first attack was partly successful. In the end Saprionovo and Oshidkovo were retaken, but Hill 93.4 remained in enemy hands. Hill 93.4 allowed the Soviets to control the entire Velikaya River valley and both villages. The battle group suffered heavy casualties not only in dead and wounded, but a large number of men missing in action as well. By the evening order for the attack was re-issued and by 1730 once more Saprionovo and Oshidkovo was in Latvian hands and remained so for the rest of the day.

Of particular note is the situation with the casualties on March 16th. By the evening the 1st Battalion of the 32nd Regiment was left with only 29 men under Warrant Officer Bedelis' command. So the battalion presumably lost 127 soldiers and was practically destroyed. A similar situation was in the 15th Reconnaissance Battalion, which according to its commanding officer Captain P. Lapainis had lost 60 men during the day. So the total number of casualties was nearly 200 men between the two battalions that had been most engaged in the fight. On the other hand, according to the 15th Division Headquarters Personnel Department's reports, the whole 15th Division lost on 16 March one officer killed, three wounded and 14 NCO's and privates killed, 87 wounded, and two missing in action. The difference is nearly 100 men.¹⁶

In the early morning of March 17 the 32nd Regiment received some reinforcements. These included the regiment's 7th Company (15 men) together with the 15th Division's antitank gun crews who were left without guns. The 33rd Grenadier Regiment's 14th Antitank Company led by First Lieutenant Strazdins with 29 men was attached, but not permanently assigned, to Captain Hazner's 1st Battalion. In the same way the 34th Regiment's 14th Antitank Company with 36 men was sent to the 15th Reconnaissance Battalion.

On March 17 the 32nd Regiment's 2nd Battalion was attached to the Silgailis Battle Group as well. This battalion was formed from remnants of the 5th and 6th Companies and reinforced with 99 men from the 15th Antitank Battalion's two companies that were still without guns. It is remarkable that despite the reinforcements that had been received all companies committed to the battle had about a 15-man strength – the rest of the soldiers having been lost along the way. The disastrous state of the actual battle strength shocked the 15th Division commander, who on 17 March issued an order to establish a court-martial to deal with any unauthorized absence from the battlefield.¹⁷

On the morning of 17 March the Silgailis Battle Group attack began at 0930, but did not succeed because the Red Army attacked at the same time with some

16 Casualty Report from March 1 to March 31, 8 June 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 1. l., 185. lp.

17 Order of the 15th Division's Commander, 17 March 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 1. l., 99. lp.

tank support. After the initial action the rest of the day passed relatively peacefully and 15th Division's losses were one officer killed, one wounded, and for NCOs and privates 11 killed, 45 wounded and two missing.¹⁸

In the evening of 17 March the 6th Army Corps headquarters issued an order stating the need for new replacements. The 44th Grenadier Regiment's 2nd Battalion, led by Second Lieutenant Vilks was moved from the 2nd Brigade's left flank. Although 15th Division headquarters repeatedly asked to free up new reserves and, if necessary, to weaken the right flank of the division's defensive front, this action was not done in time.

The order also specifically noted the need to delay the enemy's concentration in the woods west of Hryapino Village as much as possible. During the night these areas were to be harassed with artillery fire while on the coming day an attack with air support was planned.¹⁹ The attack was planned to start at 1700 on 18 March. In 15th Division's sector six "companies" should take part: 15th Reconnaissance Battalion with the 2nd Company (Second Lieutenant Krebs, 20 men), 32nd Regiment's 5th Company (First Lieutenant Juraidis, 15 men), the 6th Company (Warrant Officer Apinis, 15 men), the 33rd Regiment's 14th Company (First Lieutenant Stazdins, 29 men), the 32nd Regiment's 1st Battalion (Warrant Officer Bedelis, 45 men) and the 32nd Regiment's 7th Company (Second Lieutenant Skrivelis, 12 men). In the 2nd Brigades attack sector the 44th Regiment's 3rd Battalion (Second Lieutenant Vilks) together with the 43rd Regiment's 3rd Battalion's two companies (some 150 men) joined in. The plan involved some 300 men, basically an understrength infantry battalion, although the Silgailis battle group was composed of five infantry battalions on paper.²⁰

On 18 March the first Luftwaffe dive bomber air attack began at 1547 with the main target of the forest to the west of Hryapino. Another set of air strikes was made at 1700 and by 1740 Hill 93.4 was in Latvian hands with relatively few casualties – seven NCOs and soldiers killed, 20 wounded and five missing. After an unsuccessful attack the Red Army stopped further actions and began preparations for the next assault – but this time in a different place.

There were some similarities that are worthy to note. It is interesting to track the 32nd Regiment's 1st Battalion roster changes during these three days of combat. On the early morning of March 16 the battalion had 140 men. On the evening it had 29 men on the roster, and on the evening of 17 March 45 men. On the evening of March 18 – after the successful attack – the unit had 49 men. The largest number of casualties happened even before the battalion began its first counterattack on 16 March. Afterwards, when the situation became clearer and reinforcements arrived with heavy weapons and air support, the stragglers joined in.

18 Casualty Report from March 1 to March 31, 8 June 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 1. l., 185. lp.

19 Ibid., p. 105. lp. War Diary entry for March 17, 1944.

20 Vilis Hazners to Arvids Kripens, 23 March 1944, LKM 5 – 30798/ 1705 – DK.

The other noticeable trend is the consistent manner in which companies were attached to the front line battalions. For example, gunners lacking their artillery pieces were not incorporated into infantry companies, but remained independent units under their own commanders. It appears that the general rule was to keep the original companies intact if there was a commanding officer available. The 32nd Regiment's 1st Battalion was reformed as a company when two company commanders were wounded on the morning of 16 March. After the battle the battalion's commanding officer Captain Hazners noted that he is not worried about casualties since some 20 men in each company – those he called “old crew” – were left on hand. The most important thing was timing for new replacements to join their companies since newcomers were usually poorly trained. In the case of Hazners' battalion there were four days of training and familiarization of the replacements with their new unit in the reserve lines before the battalion was sent into action again and the commander used this time well.²¹ Not all of the 15th Division units had a chance to do that.

The Second Stage (26 March – 31 March 1944)

In the second stage during one week the division suffered the following loss of officers: 9 KIA/ 12 WIA/ 4 MIA. Losses for NCOs and privates were 137 KIA/ 418 WIA / 184 MIA. This number of losses can be considered as heavy. On the west bank of the Velikaya River, despite being placed in well-built positions, the 15th Division suffered three times the losses compared to the battles in the open fields on the east bank. Although the VI Corps provided a reconnaissance report that precisely determined the direction of expected enemy attack, the 15th Division was not able to spare the reserves needed to withstand the attack.

It is worth mentioning that the casualties suffered until 25 March were replaced. By 5 March, 1944 the 15th Division received two officers, 43 non-commissioned officers and 430 privates from the 15th Field Replacement Battalion, thus replacing casualties suffered on the east bank of the Velikaya River.

On 21 March the 15th Division's units were waiting for the comparatively well trained soldiers sent by the 15th Reserve and Training Brigade. These troops did not arrive due to mistakes of the Division headquarters Ib Section. Instead of the well trained soldiers the division expected, on 21 March the poorly trained 2nd Border Guard Regiment arrived at the Abrene train station. The arrival of this regiment was a complete surprise to the officers who met them. The 15th Division's headquarters decided to improvise and use the available 2nd Border Guard Regiment soldiers as replacements. Only four trucks were available to move them to the 15th Division's units instead of the 40 required and planned for. Moreover, these four

21 Ibid.

trucks arrived only on the evening of the 25 March, when it would be too late.²² By the evening of the 25 March the units of the 15th Division received 1,572 privates from the 2nd Border Guard Regiment.²³

On the morning of the 26 March the 15th Division was, according to the divisional and army reports, considered ready to meet the expected Red Army attack as the division was now far better equipped than it had been at the beginning of March near the Velikaya River.

The 34th Grenadier Regiment received the main attack of the First Assault Army and therefore suffered the most. The utter defeat of the 34th Regiment had a substantial impact on the further VI Corps battles on the banks of the Velikaya River. Having gained a bridgehead on the west bank of the river, the commander of the Soviet 2nd Baltic Front transferred to this sector the 10th Guards Army, which reinforced the attacks and thus increased the casualties of the Latvian soldiers. If the 34th Regiment had been able to hold its defensive line it is most likely that the 10th Guard Army would have been transferred to another sector. The reasons for the failure of the 34th Regiment were the same as previously noted. When the Soviet artillery barrage began, the poorly trained soldiers from 2nd Border Guard Regiment disobeyed their officers and retreated. Major Kilitis, chief of staff of the 34th Grenadier Regiment, described the situation: "After the barrage had gone on for quite a while the first runaway soldiers appeared. They all cried wildly that everybody is dead and gone and they are the only ones still alive."²⁴

In a week's time the division completely lost its combat effectiveness and a gradual transfer operation was begun to move the division to another sector. Although the losses had been very heavy the number of casualties was not the main reason for the 15th Division's failure. The losses sustained by the 43rd Grenadier Regiment of the 19th Division at the end of March 1945 can be noted for the sake of comparison. During two weeks one regiment suffered the following losses: non-commissioned officers and privates: 73 dead and 122 missing. Moreover, besides those irreversible losses, there were also the wounded. Yet, despite these casualties, the 43rd Grenadier Regiment retained its battle capability and continued to fight effectively on the frontlines until the end of the war.

The underlying reason for the collapse of the 15th Division was its lack of training and cohesion which created for the soldiers the "empty battlefield" in the same way as it had happened at the beginning of March. To illustrate the events two loss reports can be compared. On 1 April 1944 (e.g. during a combat period) the 15th Division prepared a report on the battles of the previous two weeks, when from

22 War Diary, entries for March 17 and March 23, 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 1. l., 107. 123 lp.; Ib War Diary, entry for March 26, 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 21. l., 8. lp.

23 15th Field Replacement Battalion Status Report, March 5, 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 3. l., 30. lp.

24 Julijs Kilitis, *Es kara aiziedams* (Toronto, 1956), p. 66.

16 March till 31 March the unit's officers losses were 10/25/7, non-commissioned officers and privates losses were 189/650/566. However, the report on daily losses compiled as of the 8 June but covering the same period of time – the two weeks from 16 March to 31 March – provides information that the division officer losses were 11/27/5; non-commissioned officer and private losses were 190/643/193.²⁵ The figures nearly correspond in all categories, but for the missing in action soldiers. On 1 April the headquarters of the 15th Division recorded as missing 373 more than the figure reported on the 8th of June. These missing soldiers must have been “found themselves back” and thus were excluded from the list of missing. It is most likely that these more than 300 soldiers, practically speaking a number equal to combat ready infantry battalion, played the major role in creating the tipping point.

One of the most important reasons why the 15th Division was defeated on 26 March and afterwards declared battle incapable was a very low level of fighting power among the newly arriving replacements from Border Guard Regiments. It should be emphasized that the level of training prior to arriving at the front was not the most crucial factor, since very few of the mobilized young men in late autumn 1943 had an average of more than 40 days training time. The Border Guard Regiment soldiers had a similar training experience in the period from February 1944 to mid-March 1944, when the regiments were sent to the front.

The first significant difference between the categories is the average age. The Border Guard Regiment soldiers mean age of 33 years was significantly higher than the other soldier categories. While 33 years is not considered to be a physically restrictive age, but is safe to say that in this age soldiers had a stable family along with the additional motive to want to return home to his loved ones.²⁶ Another important difference is the social background of the Border Guard Regiment's soldiers. In the 15th Division war diary we can find the 3rd Border Regiment's composition.²⁷ It shows an unusually large number of non-Latvians, Catholics, and economically and socially vulnerable soldiers who generally had a low level of education as well. During the process of mobilization there was considerable corruption among the officials who could be expected to ensure that, for a price, the better off could avoid frontline infantry duty. It appears that the border guards sent to the front were those who could not afford the bribes or in some other way avoid being mobilized for the infantry.²⁸ This does not mean that the Border Regiment soldiers were necessarily

25 Stober, *Die lettischen Divisionen*, p. 316. Casualties Report from March 1 to March 31, 8 June 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 1. l., 185. lp.

26 According to the 1935 Census at the age of 21 only 10% of the Latvian men were married, but at the age 33 the number rises to 65%. Skujenieks, M. *Latvijas statistikas atlases* (Riga, 1937), p. 6.

27 Summary of the 3rd Border Regiment's Personnel by Nationality, Religion, Profession and Education, 23 March 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 1. l., 123. lp.

28 R. Bangerskis meeting with F. Jeckeln, 21 March 1944, LKM 5 – 30797/1704 – DK.

worse human material, but the mobilization procedures and the haphazard training and deployment to the front only exacerbated a bad situation. Among the enlisted men the conditions certainly did not help create the necessary feelings of trust of their superiors and comrades. This trend was especially important considering the short time period of preparation available to them.

The Third Stage (1 April 1944 – 14 April 1944)

During the third stage the 15th Division's officer losses were: 1 KIA/ 8 WIA/ 1 MIA. NCO and private losses were 77 KIA/ 269 WIA/ 78 MIA. These losses can be considered as fairly heavy, taking into consideration the intensity of the combat in the Streshnyova bridgehead on the west bank of the Velikaya River. The term "fairly heavy" is justified by the fact that at the beginning of April the 15th Division units were gradually withdrawn from the frontline and transferred to the rear for training. In fact, during this period the 15th Division was partly broken up as a unit. On 3 April 1944 the 33rd Grenadier Regiment was incorporated into the 13th *Luftwaffe* Field Division. On 5 April 1944 the VI Corps headquarters issued an order concerning the replacement of the 15th Division with the German 83rd Infantry Division.²⁹ According to the corps' plans, the infantry regiments were supposed to be replaced, but other divisional units (the 15th Artillery Regiment, the 15th Sapper Regiment) were to be attached to the 83rd Infantry Division. Despite the fact that particular grenadier regiments were attached to various VI Corps divisions, the losses did not substantially increase. In total from 1 March to 14 April the 15th Division suffered the following losses: officers 13 KIA/ 41 WIA/ 7 MIA. NCO and private losses were: 349 KIA/ 1116 WIA/ 299 MIA.

Conclusions

A combination of several reasons caused the serious loss of fighting power of the 15th Division and the rating of this division as having fully lost its combat effectiveness despite the fact that the casualties suffered were not extreme.

First of all, the defensive sector itself was a problem for the 15th Division. The chosen sector was far from roads and bridges over the Velikaya River because it was considered to be a quiet sector. Yet, this precise sector chosen for the 15th Division had been used by Soviet partisan units for the purpose of crossing the Velikaya River in the summer of 1942. The terrain was thoroughly explored and there were a number of Red Army supporters in the area.³⁰ As early as 1 March the first probing attacks to support the river crossing began and this initiated some fierce fighting.

29 Order of the VI Corps for replacement of the 15th Division, 5 April 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 1. l., 163. lp.

30 Vilis Samsons V, *No Lovates lidz Zilupei* (Riga, 1987), p. 116.

The need to move the 15th Division's main front line of the defence sector from the west bank to the east bank of the Velikaya River has been discussed. The VI Corps' order goes a long way to explain this move by the need to cover the very important OPOCHKA – OSTROVA main road, which lead directly to the river within the sector of the 15th Division's left neighbour, the XXXVIIIth Army Corps. Moving the main front line in this sector required that the same movement was carried out also in the sector of the VIth Corps. The whole Latvian 2nd Brigade's (later renamed the 19th Division) defense sector and the left wing of the 15th Division's defense sector moved to the east bank. The corps commander's decision was fully justified by the situation. However, the most questionable issue is the 15th Division's command actions to implement this order. For example, the decision to establish the main front line on the east bank through the village of Seredkina Slepni, although not specifically pointed out in the Corps order, can be considered as unreasonable. To make matters worse this move was made contrary to 32nd Grenadier Regiment commander's view that there was no need to hold this position. On 11 March the same type of mistake was made when the VI Corps' order to incorporate the 15th Reconnaissance Battalion into the 2nd Brigade was delayed. Because of this delay on the morning of 16 March the battalion was situated on both banks of the river without any local reserves.³¹ Such situations could usually be accepted and fixed during the course of events, yet the casualties that were suffered in the unsuitable terrain turned out to be irreplaceable for other reasons. The choice of the defensive sector did not help and the 15th Division finally ran out of luck. Instead of the quiet sector they expected to occupy, the 15th Division became the focus of combat operations. The 15th Division suffered some more bad luck on the morning of 26 March when a chance hit by a Soviet night bomber destroyed all the artillery ammunition stocks at once. Thus, the 34th Grenadier Regiment was left without artillery support at a very critical moment.³²

The second factor that made an impact on the 15th Division's combat effectiveness was the lack of training and cohesion, accompanied by simple incompetence at all the levels of the division command. The division's headquarters allowed the disintegration of the divisional supply and transport services. Indeed, the division headquarters began functioning only at the beginning of March, 1944 and this lack of effective command at the top prevented the efficient supply of the division of its required ammunition and uniforms and other supplies, and also prevented the timely request for replacements to replace battle losses. During this series of battles the divisional headquarters, despite receiving surprisingly precise intelligence reports from the VI Corps, failed to prepare and shift reserves quickly. The situation was worsened by the bad relations between the German and Latvian officers, which led

31 War Diary, entry for March 11, 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 3. l., 53. lp.

32 Ib War Diary, entry for March 26, 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 21. l., 9. lp.

to lack of cooperation and understanding on both sides. This lack of cooperation between the two nationalities came from a lack of experience. The Latvian commanders believed that the heavy losses in late 1943 and early 1944 were related to the policy of mixing German and Latvian units during the so-called training period. However, events on the Eastern Front as well as the later battles of the Latvian Legion show that losses for the units that had been split during training and those that had remained intact were about the same.

The most serious deficit in experience and training manifested itself at the level of the battalion and company commanders. Latvian Legion officers during the battles, in their private letters and also in the memoirs written after the war, always underlined the company commander's role and importance on the battlefield. Provided a company commander has authority, adequate training and strong leadership skills his company would likely suffer comparatively few casualties that could be easily replaced. When a company commander was shown to be unsuited for his job, the company had correspondingly lower fighting power and was likely to suffer heavy casualties.³³

In determining the main reasons for the scale of the casualties the 15th Division's command elements and Latvian officers in their private correspondence refer to the following correlation: a company of soldiers in battle that kept their discipline and kept fighting would have fewer casualties. On the other hand, a company that panicked and left their trenches during a tank attack or artillery barrage would take considerable losses. To illustrate this, the events of the 9 March battle near Serekina Slepni Village and Hill 82.2 can serve as an example. On this day the 15th Division suffered the heaviest irreversible daily loss from in the period of 1 to 25 March – 30 dead and 3 missing.³⁴ The main reason for the losses was the panic that broke out among the companies of the 32nd Grenadier Regiment when they spotted four Soviet tanks and immediately left their positions and started to pull back from the east bank over the frozen river.³⁵

Unfortunately, the 15th Division failed to replace the experienced officers and non-commissioned officers it lost in these battles. The inability to replace casualties was a special peculiarity of the Latvian Legion's unit replacement system. Or to put it more precisely, the lack of any real system at all. Unlike the German Wehrmacht units that had a precise system for the replacement of casualties, the divisions of the Latvian Legion had an improvised system to replace their losses. Under a system

33 Peteris Lapainis' War Diary, entry for March 17, 1944, LKM 5 – 922 – DK/p; Kilitis, *Es kara aiziedams*, p. 66; Rudolfs Bangerskis' letters, March – April, 1944, LKM from 5 – 30791/1698 – DK to 5 – 30796/1703 – DK.

34 Casualties Report from March 1 to March 31, 8 June 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 1. l., 185. lp.

35 War Diary, entry for March 9, 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 3. l., 46. lp. ; Peteris Lapainis' War Diary, entry for March 12, LKM 5 – 922 – DK/p.

without set rules the most efficient divisional unit was the 2nd Brigade, later the 19th Division, which had been fighting in these Eastern Front conditions since June 1943. In its turn the 15th Division, as a result of lack of experience and of competence, did not know how to use the untrained and unfit Border Guard Regiment soldiers as replacements. From 1 March to 15 April the 15th Division received in total 23 officers and 2,721 non-commissioned officers and privates, as well as six officers and 739 non-commissioned officers and privates who were returned to their units after recovery.³⁶ This is almost double compared to official number of casualties.

It should be noted that Latvian officers considered that the lack of replacements had a decisive impact on bringing about the disaster of 26 March. In March 1944 the 15th Division faced a disastrous cycle. The higher the casualties, the larger the number of replacements that were needed. The larger the numbers of replacements required, the less training those soldiers had. This bigger number of replacement needed less trained replacements, which again result in heavy casualties due to lack of training. It is important to note that former Latvian Army officers who served in the Latvian Legion did not understand the German replacement system. Many of them served in the Russian Army during World War I and their understanding what the replacement system should look like was based on their own experience. In the Latvian Army an individual replacement system existed that was different from German Army's, so Latvian officers were not worried that the divisional training and replacement brigade, which was under SS-FHA command, did not perform its main task which was training replacements to be sent as units to the division, not as individuals.³⁷

The bitter lessons of March 1944 created an understanding of what the improvised replacement "system" should look like. In order to keep the units' fighting power at a sustainable level it was necessary to have a leadership cadre in place that formed at least a 15 to 20 men group in each company. In order to keep this nucleus intact the lower level commanders tried as often as possible to send "their" men to the hospitals, training or on leave so that they had some "reserve" not on the battlefield just in case casualties would be high and reconstitution was necessary. This was true at every level, and in some 32nd Regiment companies the platoons were led by "old crew" privates instead of newly arrived NCO's.³⁸

As for the replacements, it did not matter how good the cohesion was in arriving units because even squads would be split up and attached to the cadre already in place. To be effective, replacements have to be physically fit and have basic infantry training and are not sent to the frontlines in the middle of the battle, but rather before or after the fight. The 15th Division tried hard not to repeat the disaster of

36 Replacements from March 1 to April 15, 1944, LVVA, 296. f., 1. apr., 1. l., 187. lp.

37 A. Silgailis to R. Bangerskis, 12 March 1944, LKM 5 – 30790/1697 –DK.

38 Karlis Dekteris to Arvīds Krīpens, LKM 5 – 9466/598 – DK, p. 73.

26 March when replacements arrived on the evening before a major assault. There was a need for time to allow the old leadership cadre to put in place their authority and experience. Of course some of the new replacements did get along with commanding officers and the “old crew” and if they survive they themselves became seasoned veterans, but they had to obey rules and traditions that might be very different from company to company. If they could not adapt to these conditions then there was always the temptation to become “sick” or not to return from leave or training.

Keeping up fighting power was an absolute necessity. But the way to achieve that fighting power could vary from division to division. The units of the Latvian Legion used their own “replacement system”, which was quite different from the textbook German replacement system that was based on the idea of keeping units intact as long as possible. That attitude was shared even by high ranking Waffen SS commanders. For example, when in early January 1945 the 19th Division needed replacements after the successful, but very costly, Third Kurland Battle, the 15th Division commander *SS-Oberführer* Herbert von Obwurzer issued an order to send one battalion from each grenadier regiment as replacements to the 19th Division.³⁹ So von Obwurzer planned to receive three under-strength battalions from the 19th Division. The plan was changed when the commander of VI SS Army Corps *SS-Obergruppenführer* Walther Krüger arrived. During a commanders’ meeting he said that he did not need battalions, what he wanted was 2000 replacement officers, NCOs and privates to be posted individually and he needed them as quickly as possible before the next Red Army assault.⁴⁰

Of course, when whole companies and battalions were overrun as happened with the 34th Regiment on 26 March, then there was no cadre left and replacements had to be used as whole units. In the case of the 34th Regiment reconstitution was impossible. So the survivors of the regiment were put together into 1st Battalion and the 2nd Battalion was reformed by renaming it the 15th Reconnaissance Battalion.

By summing up all factors we see that from March to April 1944 the 15th Division had its highest combat power (number of troops) and also its lowest fighting power (rating of combat effectiveness). There were many reasons for this and this situation cannot simply be explained by the failings in the replacement system or the failure of German propaganda to motivate the soldiers.

39 Order for transfer of battalions to the 19th Division, January 6, 1945, LVVA, 296.f. 1. apr., 10. l., 221. lp.

40 Commanders’ meeting, January 12, 1945, Ibid., 255. lp.