

The Last Ditch - Battles for the Oder Line – 1945

Enfield, NC

April 17-19, 2020



Soviet Unit Impression

Soviet forces will be portraying troops of the 57th Guards Rifle Division, 4th Guards Rifle Corps, 8th Guards Army, 1st Belorussian Front.

Unit History

The division was formed as the 153rd Rifle Division on 22 June 1941 in response to the German invasion.

For their defense of Belarus and fighting around Smolensk, the 153rd Rifle Division was one of the first divisions to be designated a Guards formation. On September 18, 1941, the division was reformed and redesignated the 3rd Guards Rifle Division.

After taking additional heavy casualties in late 1941 and early 1942, the division was reformed for the second time in February 1942. In December 1942, the division was redesignated the 57th Guards Rifle Division.

In 1943-44, the division took part in offensive after offensive include the Izyum-Barvenkovo Offensive, the Lower Dnieper Offensive, the Dnieper–Carpathian Offensive, Operation Bagration, the Vistula–Oder Offensive, and the Battle of Poznań.

In 1945, Stalin was determined that the Army that had defended Stalingrad would take part in the capture of Berlin. Therefore, in a deliberate symbolic move, the 8th Guards Army was sent northwards to the center of the front, coming under command of 1st Belorussian Front. So, after being bled white in the push west, the division was reformed for the third time in early April of 1945.

It was at this point, the division would take part in the battles against the Oder line including the Seelow Heights.

Event Scenario – Flanking the Seelow Heights

The 1st Belorussian Front had nine regular and two tank armies consisting of 77 rifle divisions, two cavalry, five tank and two mechanized corps, eight artillery and one Guards mortar divisions and a mixture of other artillery and rocket launcher brigades. The front had 3,059 tanks and self-propelled guns and 18,934 artillery pieces and mortars. On the Soviet bridgehead at Küstrin, the 5th Shock and 8th Guards armies were posted directly opposite the strongest part of the defenses, where the Reichsstraße 1 to Berlin passed through the heights.

The Germans correctly predicted that the main Soviet thrust would be made over the River Oder and along the Reichsstraße 1 at Seelow Heights. They defended the riverbank with only a light skirmishing screen and strongly fortified the Seelow Heights, which rise about 48 m (157 ft) above the Oder and overlook the river where the Reichsstraße crossed it. The Oder's floodplain was already saturated by the spring thaw, but German engineers also released water from a reservoir upstream, which turned the plain into a swamp. Behind the heights, they built three lines of defenses, spreading back toward Berlin. The last was the Wotan Line, 10–15 mi (16–24 km) behind the front line. These lines consisted of anti-tank ditches, anti-tank gun emplacements, and an extensive network of trenches and bunkers.

In the early hours of 16 April, the offensive began with a massive bombardment by thousands of artillery pieces and Katyushas. Well before dawn, the 1st Belorussian Front attacked across the Oder and the 1st Ukrainian Front attacked across the Neisse. The 1st Belorussian Front was the stronger force, but it had the more difficult assignment since it was facing the bulk of the German forces.

The swampy ground proved to be a great hindrance, and a German counter-barrage caused heavy Soviet casualties. Frustrated by the slow advance, Zhukov threw in his reserves, which according to his earlier plan were to be held back until the expected breakthrough. By early evening, an advance of 4–6 km (2.5–3.7 mi) had been achieved (the 77th Rifle Corps from the 3rd Shock Army had advanced 8 km (5.0 mi)), but the second German defensive line remained intact. Zhukov was forced to report that his battle was not going as planned. However, in the south the attack by Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front was going according to plan. To spur Zhukov on, Stalin told him that he let Konev direct his tank armies north towards Berlin.

On the second day, the 1st Belorussian Front's troops continued to advance in accordance with the initial plan. By nightfall on 17 April, the German second defensive line (Stein Stellung) was broken by the 5th Shock Army and 2nd Guards Tank Army. The right flank of the 4th Guards Rifle Corps of the 8th Guards Army, together with the 11th Tank Corps of the 1st Guards Tank Army, had taken advantage of

the success of their comrades and also advanced. The 47th and the 3rd shock armies progressed another 4–8 km (2.5–5.0 mi).

On 18 April, both Soviet fronts advanced with heavy losses. The Seelow Heights was bypassed from the north, during which Soviet troops met counterattacks by German reserves: 11th SS Panzergrenadier Division Nordland, 23rd SS Panzergrenadier Division Nederland and SS-Panzer Abteilung 103 (503rd). By nightfall, an advance of 3–5 km (1.9–3.1 mi) on the right flank and 3–8 km (1.9–5.0 mi) in the center had been achieved, and the 1st Belorussian Front had reached the third and final German line of defence.

On 19 April, the 1st Belorussian Front eventually broke through the final defensive line of the Seelow Heights and now nothing but broken German formations lay between them and Berlin. The remnants of the 9th Army and the 4th Panzer Army were enveloped by the 1st Belorussian Front and by elements of the 1st Ukrainian Front which had broken through and turned north. Other armies of the 1st Ukrainian Front raced west towards the Americans. By the close of 19 April, the German eastern frontline had effectively ceased to exist. All that remained were pockets of resistance.

Mindset, Morale, and Supply

It is important to note that by April 1945, the 57th Guards would have essentially been in its' fourth formation. After the encirclements of 1941 and 1942, many of the men and women marching into Germany would have been new to the division since. Some would have been more recent replacements following the crossing of the Dnieper.

Being part of the “tip of the spear” of the 1st Belorussian Front, the unit would have been well clothed and equipped. Morale would have been high due to fighting the Fascist enemy on his own soil.

Impression Guidelines

General Rules

1. The goal is simple - to look like typical Red Army soldiers fighting in Germany in April 1945. Please keep that in mind when putting together your impression.
2. Take a “Less is more” approach. The Red Army was travelling pretty light at this point in the war.
3. The Command Staff will be inspecting all attendees. If the Commander suggests you remove or switch something, don't get upset. (See Rule #1)
4. Loaner gear is available so if you need something, contact the Commander. We are happy to help.

Uniform

Headgear

Preferred – Since it will likely be cold, the ushanka with wartime-style cap star is preferred. If warm, the pilotka should be worn. Pilotka may be wool, cotton, or wool/cotton blend. Cap star can be large or small, painted or enameled.

Not allowed - Repro or postwar "Staybright" type stars.

Gynmastiorka (Tunic)

Preferred – Obr43 pattern without pockets.

Accepted – Obr35 pattern converted to 1943 regulations or Obr43 pattern with pockets.

Sharovari (Breeches)

Preferred - Obr35 or Obr43 pattern.

Footwear

Sapogi (high boots) or botinki (low boots) with proper puttees. Soviet and Lend-Lease styles are acceptable.

Undergarments

Preferred – Soviet-issue underwear

Acceptable – Lend-Lease underwear or "tank top" without tags or printing.

Not allowed – Modern tshirts and underwear

Medals and Decorations

Guards Badge - All attendees will have a proper Guards badge.

Campaign medals are not authorized.

Equipment

Kaska (Helmet)

Every soldier will have a helmet. "Everywhere around in the sand I see soldiers...I see only their raised heads, like water melons in a garden."

Preferred – standard wartime style SSh-40

Accepted – SSh-39.

Not allowed – "Converted" Czech or other postwar Communist.

Remyen (Belt)

Preferred – Leather belt. Soviet types or US-made “Garrison” belts would be appropriate.

Accepted – Canvas/leather belt

Ammunition Pouch – Please wear one pouch on your right side.

Preferred – “Reparations” or reproduction leather/pigskin pouches for rifles. Three-cell canvas pouches for submachine gun. Leather/pigskin or synthetic pouches for SVT-40.

Discouraged – “Tsarist” type ammunition pouches.

Not allowed – Kirza rifle pouches or postwar Polish submachine gun pouches with nylon belt loops.

Lopata (Shovel) – Shovel should have appropriate carrier.

Preferred – Soviet-style riveted or stamped shovels are accepted.

Accepted – German shovels

Not allowed – Chinese or “Spetsnaz” shovels.

Flyaga (Canteen) – Canteen should have appropriate carrier.

Preferred – Wartime style with small threads, glass canteens, or postwar (large threads) that have been repainted or stripped to bare aluminum.

Accepted – Prewar canteen (cork stopper) or German canteens in Soviet carriers.

Reluctantly accepted – Unmodified postwar canteens.

Plasch-Palatka (Rain Cape)

Preferred – Wartime style with leather or handsewn grommets.

Accepted – “Defarbed” postwar type with handsewn grommets.

Not allowed – Postwar style with brass grommets.

Myeshok (Knapsack)

Preferred – Soviet-made wartime style.

Accepted – Reproduction wartime style.

Not allowed – Postwar style with pockets.

Soomka Protivogaznaya (Gas Mask Bag) – Optional. Limited numbers.

Preferred – Leningrad pattern or other wartime styles.

Accepted – Correctly converted postwar Soviet.

Knives – Knives are optional. Side knives in limited numbers will be allowed.

Preferred – Pocket knife.

Accepted – SVT-40 bayonet or original K-98 “trophy” bayonet. NR-40 “Scout” Knife may be worn by scouts, snipers, sappers, and as approved by the Commander.

Not allowed – Repro K-98 bayonets, trophy daggers, or rubber knives.

Grenade Pouch – Optional – very limited numbers. If you are going to carry a grenade pouch, you must have appropriate and correct dummy grenades.

Preferred – Nothing.

Accepted – Three cell pouch for F-1 or RG-42 grenades.

Not allowed – RG-33 pouches, shovel pouches, etc...

Koteluk (Mess kit)

Preferred – pot type.

Accepted – Two-piece style. Should be repainted or stripped to bare aluminum.

Reluctantly accepted – Unmodified postwar mess kit.

Medical Equipment

All medical equipment will be approved by the Senior Sanitar prior to being fielded.

Cold Weather Gear

Headgear

Preferred – Ushanka with appropriate chapka-size star.

Not allowed – Budionovka, Czech ushanka, balaclava, or German toques.

Coat

Preferred – Shinel (overcoat) with correct wartime insignia or telogrieka (padded coat). When not in use, shinel should be rolled.

Gloves/mittens

Preferred – Soviet canvas/felt gloves or knit gloves.

Accepted – German or other nationalities trigger finger mittens.

Not allowed – Shearling or modern gloves.

Trousers

Accepted – Padded trousers are accepted but not required.

Small Arms

The following small arms are acceptable for this scenario:

DP light machine gun

PPSh-41

PPS-42

M91-30 rifle

M1891 rifle

M44 carbine

M38 carbine (specialists only)