Experience the Life of the German Soldier

2/Pz.Aufkl.Abtl.Grossdeutschland

John Leete in conversation with Neil Barlow of GD Recon. All images courtesy of GD Recon.

Starting any conversation on a positive note is always a good omen. On this occasion it was very upbeat as Neil explained “2009 has been a successful year for GD Recon and 2010 is already looking like another good year.”

A part from anything else, this very proactive UK-based group has not only become a member of the World War II Living History Association, but they have also expanded their capabilities by becoming fully mobilized with period transport. But more of that later. Meanwhile, let Neil Barlow give a brief history of 2/Pz.Aufkl.Abtl.Grossdeutschland.

“The Grossdeutschland Division was given the nickname ‘the Führer’s Fire Brigade’ because it was sent into gaps within the line where another unit had collapsed. It was, more often than not, exposed to some of the fiercest fighting on the Eastern Front and it suffered high casualties on a regular basis. Originally, the Grossdeutschland Regiment, which incidentally became a division in 1942, served in Berlin as the Wacht regiment or guard regiment. Regiment first went to war during the Battle for France and was subsequently refitted in readiness for Operation Sealion, the planned invasion of Britain. When Sealion was cancelled, Grossdeutschland was sent to the Eastern Front; this was in 1941 and it remained there until the end of the war. They fought in many of the most notable battles including the Kursk Offensive of 1943 and the Defence of Kurland in 1945.”

Portraying this regiment then is a different take on portraying the more ‘obvious’ units and regiments of the German Army. For spectators and all those interested in WWII re-enactment, being able to learn more of the regiments they are so not familiar with makes for a more rewarding experience.

The list of credits, as far as events are concerned, are as you would expect of a high profile group which has established a good reputation in re-enactment. “We take part in many events including the Bovington Tank Fest, where incidentally we got up close to the only working original Tiger 1 Tank in the world”, said Neil, clearly expressing his delight. “We also attend the Royal Armouries at Fort Nelson in Portsmouth, the Liverpool Military Show and the English Heritage Festival of History at Kelmarsh Hall. So we really cover the country.”

In addition, the group also attended the Victory Show at Cosby, the Churnet Valley Railway in Staffordshire and several private battles based upon Operation Varsity and the Retreat from the Don Battle which is staged near Thetford in Norfolk. “The ‘Don’ battle gave us an idea as to what the real GD went through. We all slept on straw in a very dilapidated building, which had no doors or windows. This was in the middle of January.”

With a busy diary and growing commitments, GD Recon is always looking for new members. “We look for like-minded people with an enthusiasm for history, World War II and the German Army. Also an interest in German beers is a bonus for when the public have gone home!” quipped Neil. “We like all new members to attend at least five events each year, which means you get your money’s worth for your membership fee. I must stress that we are a friendly group and we always have fun at events, especially at night, when we have many a good time either in the beer tent or just around the campfire.” Mention of beer again! Well I am sure that will inspire many new recruits! However, when these guys are put to the test they are absolutely professional and dedicated, so no one will begrudge them the occasional pint or two.

“Our members represent various aspects of the Grossdeutschland Division, encompassing roles such as MG gunners, Waffenmeister (Armourer), Signals using our large collection of original radio equipment, Marksman, Pioneers, Engineers, Kriegsberichter (war reporter) and Feldgendarme, (Field Police). We also erect a working field kitchen at many events and Jeannie our wonderful cook keeps us well supplied with delicious food. However, at some of the events we literally have to live off just the food we can carry.”

Neil continues, “One section of our display, which has rapidly expanded within the last year, is our medical display. As seen and enjoyed by visitors at the Victory Show, our medical display contains everything a field aid station would include and we also demonstrate field operations. This I have to mention makes some of the watching public feel very queasy! We like all new members to start as a basic rifleman before branching out into other roles. Our armoury contains most of the weapons the German Army used during WWII, including a blank firing 82mm mortar, replica flamethrower, blank firing Panzershreck and a selection of other weaponry like grenades, mines and other charge weapons.”
Tell me more about your MT (motor transport) Neil because I know you are quite proud of this. “Presently we have three motorbike combinations, and a replica Stower radio lorry which is built out of a GAZ jeep and these will be ready for the start of the 2010 season. We also have a replica SD Kfz 222 armoured car in production. All these will add to our display of course and make us more self contained. Having period transport gives our display greater authenticity.”

**SO WHAT, I ASKED NEIL, DO YOU GET FOR YOUR MEMBERSHIP?**

“Well, you get to join one of the leading and certainly one of the most exciting re-enactment societies in the country. Our membership of twenty plus is growing and the guys come from all parts of the country as well as from mainland Europe. You will be able to fully participate in several of the biggest re-enactment battles in the country and each one of these is watched by thousands of spectators and involves many rare vehicles. Oh, and there are some rather loud pyrotechnics used to add to the authenticity. More importantly, members get to further their knowledge of the German Army and to experience the life of the ‘ordinary’ German Soldier.”

It is worth making the point of course that the ‘ordinary’ soldier regardless of which country he represented, had for the most part, been a civilian who had been called up on the outbreak of war and did what he was ordered to do. The majority of German soldiers had no more of a desire to fight and kill than the British ‘Tommy’ had, but they selflessly fought and died for their country. As Neil says “We are a non-political society, which does not support or condone the actions and politics of the NSDAP. We strive for an accurate portrayal of the ordinary German fighting man of WW2.”

Uniquely, new recruits to GD Recon have the facility of a mentoring system which helps them into the hobby and there is a busy forum as well as a very helpful and informative bi-monthly newsletter called ‘Die Feuerwerker’ (the Fire Brigade) which is actually based on a news sheet of the same name which was produced for Grossdeutschland.

GD Recon has, perhaps not unsurprisingly, been involved in many film projects. These include ‘Stalingrad: The History Detectives’ for the History Channel, filming the trailer for ‘A Cold Blood Kill’ an independent film production and last summer they filmed two episodes of ‘Dangerous Adventures for Boys’ for Channel Five. For this programme, they worked with Lord Brockett and the comedian and actor Bradley Walsh.

“We also pride ourselves upon the quality and realism of the photos we produce which go on to our website. We like to do regular photo shoots and take advantage of weather conditions, such as the heavy snow we experienced in recent months”. Indeed, a visit to the website is well worthwhile not least because the photographs enable you to ‘step back in time’. They are styled and presented in such a manner as to imply they were taken somewhere in occupied Europe during the war years. Yet again, attention to detail, this time in their presentation on its website, reinforces the group’s commitment to accurate portrayal.

**SO WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR GD RECON?**

“Well 2010 is shaping up to be a good year. We have been much in demand from event organisers and our calendar is filling up fast. We hope to have our vehicle projects completed early in the year and certainly by the start of the public season and these should be at many of our shows, expanding our ever-growing unique display. We are constantly trying to improve every aspect of our impression to make sure we never become stale or complacent.”

I don’t think there is any likelihood of that Neil. The group has set themselves a very high standard which they continue to maintain.

For more information, or to apply to join the group please visit their website:

**www.gdrecon.co.uk**