Aufklärung on the move

The German Army of World War Two was well known for being highly mobile and having the ability to provide fast Panzer formations that could punch a hole in enemy defences and then supply the Infantry to quickly move in and exploit these breakthroughs, but how can this translated into re-enactment?

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As was seen in Poland, France and in the early stages of the Russian campaign this lightning war or ‘Blitzkrieg’ as it was to become known provided territorial gains in speeds that would have seemed like fantasy during the stalemate of the Great War.

For the first time, the Luftwaffe combined with advancing ground forces to supply close tactical air support to knock out problematic targets such as the Maginot Line which the French thought would halt any advance into their country. As events turned out the line of costly forts proved to be a white elephant and were quickly taken out and by passed with the minimum of German casualties.

The key to a successful action of course is good reconnaissance, intelligence gathering and the ability to use the information to your advantage. The eyes and ears of any Army is its reconnaissance battalion, which in the German Army of World War Two and to this day in the modern day Bundeswehr were known as the ‘Aufklärungs-Abteilung’ (reconnaissance battalion).

Throughout history, the job of intelligence gathering fell to lightly armoured troops and Cavalry units who could quickly and quietly cover distance, report on the enemies dispostion and then slip away avoiding contact reporting back with their valuable information to their own commanders. Although the principal remained, the dawn of the age of mechanised warfare began to change the way troops reached their objectives.

An Sd.Kfz.222, Sd.Kfz.223 (Fü) & Sd.Kfz.247b armoured cars move out on a reconaisence patrol at the Yorkshire Wartime Experience 2016.
A new uniform was commissioned for this new branch of service which saw both the men of the Aufklärungs-Abteilung and the tank crews of the Panzerwaffe turn out in their distinctive close fitting black uniforms. Confused with political elements of the SS during the war and to the present day, the reason the uniform of the vehicle crews was black was simply to hide the oil marks and stains that the men would regularly pick up as part of their job working on their vehicles.

After witnessing the slaughter of the traditional cavalry unit against the machine guns and artillery shells during the Great War, the switch from horses to motorbikes and light armoured cars began as that war drew to a close and the Armies of Western Europe began to modernise during the interwar period.

During the 1920s two English Army Officers - B.H. Liddell Hart & J.F.C. Fuller, drew on their experiences in World War One and wrote extensively on their ideas for the future of warfare which they believed lay in the mechanisation of armies.

As a result the the British War Office sanctioned the creation of the ‘Experimental Mechanised Force’ which was formed in 1927 and comprised of an entirely mobile force from reconnaissance armoured cars, to tanks and anti aircraft artillery. An offer was extended to other nations to come and view this unit in action before it was disbanded in 1928.

Amongst this delegation, were members of the German Army who realised that this was the future and quickly began to experiment with the ideas of Hart and Fuller. One of the key players in adopting these new ideas was the then Oberstleutnant Heinz Guderian who spent his own money to have Fuller’s ‘Provisional Instructions for Tank and Armoured Car Training’ book translated into German.

Guderian was to rise to prominence and wrote many papers during this interwar period championing the causes of a highly mobile force, good communications between them and the need to have high ranking Officers leading from the front allowing them to quickly appraise situations and react to them - a major factor in the speed of the victories the Wehrmacht enjoyed in the early part of the war. Quite simply, no other nation had adopted this new approach with as much vigour as the Germans and therefore could not initially match it.

As development continued, the Cavalry units were slowly absorbed into these new mechanised units who although trading in their horses for armoured cars and halftracks, retained many of the old Prussian Cavalry traditions such as using Golden Yellow trim on their uniforms to denote branch of service and wearing the Totenkopf (Death’s head) motif on their lapels which harked back to the Prussian Cavalry under Frederick the Great in the 18th Century.

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The Prussian Hussar uniform showing the Totenkopf (Death’s head) badge and golden yellow Waffenfarbe to show area of service.
In 1942, the Grossdeutschland Division were expanded into a full motorized infantry division, being designated Infanterie-Division Großdeutschland (mot). As a result, supporting units in the form of Panzer, Artillery, Engineer and Reconnaissance Battalions were added.

The Reconnaissance Battalion was initially known as the Motorcycle Battalion (Kradschutze-Abteilung) Großdeutschland, but was in reality a combination of vehicles more in keeping with an Armoured Reconnaissance unit, so in 1943 the name was changed to reflect this.

The division also used the terms and ranks of the cavalry such as Schwadron (Squadron) instead of Company, and the enlisted men did not become Grenadiers in 1943 in line with everyone else, but remained as Schützen. They also adopted the owl or ‘Uhu’ motif (a shortening of Usedom’s Hussars) which could be seen on many of their vehicles.

Our unit was set up in 2005 with a view to portraying the often overlooked history of the Panzer Aufklärungs-Abteilung Großdeutschland. At the time our impression was unique but we were also faced with the challenge of how to portray what was an extremely mobile unit without any vehicles.

With vintage Wehrmacht vehicles being so rare and incredibly expensive we needed to focus our efforts on making reproductions that could pass as originals, so back in 2009 a group member decided to put his experience as an engineer to good use and start building what was to be our first vehicle - an Sd.Kfz.222 armoured car (Sonderkraftfahrzeug or special purpose vehicle).

After much research, he came to the realisation that Land Rover Chassis’s had the correct wheel base and similar coil suspension to the original Horch heavy passenger chassis used on the Sd.Kfz.222 series making for an ideal donor chassis.

With the donor vehicle acquired and angle grinder in hand, it was reduced down to a rolling chassis with an engine - then his work as an engineer could really begin. From technical drawings, scale model kits and as much other reference material as he could gather, he began to weld the metal framework to the chassis to which the armour plate would be attached giving the vehicle it’s distinctive angular shape. After years of hard work and with much excitement the 222 finally made it’s debut at the Victory Show back in 2012.
Inspired by the 222, senior members of the group began to wonder if more reproduction vehicles could be built or acquired. There was much discussion as to which way to go and it was decided that rather than diversify into buying trucks, tracked vehicles or artillery pieces that weren’t really relevant to our impression, we should focus on motorcycles and another armoured car.

In 2014 a syndicate of group members was put in place to fund another build and by luck the perfect vehicle came up for auction in the Autumn. Although not entirely suitable for our needs as a Russian front unit, it represented a relatively quick conversion instead of a long build, so a deal was quickly struck with the seller and we took ownership of our second armoured car - an Sd.Kfz.233(Fu). The 223 was a car that carried the powerful communications equipment so essential to reconnaissance missions and featured the distinctive tubular ariel which can be folded up and down to improve reception.

The conversion work was carried out over the winter and spring of 2015 and after much grinding, sanding and painting by fingers numb with cold the 233 made it’s debut in early 2015.

Around the same time as we acquired the 223, work was also commissioned on our third vehicle - an Sd.Kfz.247b. Although only 58 of these vehicles were produced between 1941 - 42, the original Panzer Aufklärungs Abteilung Grossdeutschland made use of one, so we thought this would be a nice, not to mention unusual addition to our fleet. The 247 was a real command vehicle transporting 3 crew members plus an additional radio operator and up to two passengers usually of a high rank. This vehicle was able to keep pace with the lighter armoured cars when out on missions but carried and powerful radio set on which contact could be made with the Luftwaffe to co-ordinate air support if the troops on the ground were struggling in the face of the enemy (a principle still used today).

There are now plans to extend the fleet even further with work already underway converting a Russian Gaz69 jeep to replica Stoewer Typ40. We’re hoping to have this ready to show in early 2017 and then who knows where we’ll go in our quest for a convincing portrayal of the Aufklärungs-Abteilung Grossdeutschland - a halftrack for the riflemen to ride in would be nice!

To see more of our reconnaissance vehicles or to find out more about our group, please visit our website at:

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