

= Helmuth Raithel =

Helmuth Raithel (9 April 1907 ? 12 September 1990) was a German officer who held the rank of SS @-@ Standartenführer (colonel) in the Waffen @-@ SS during World War II . While still at school , Raithel was swept up in the excitement of the Munich Beer Hall Putsch of 9 November 1923 led by Adolf Hitler , and was subsequently awarded the coveted Blood Order , even though he was not a member of the Nazi Party . He joined the Reichswehr (interwar German Army) in 1926 . After World War II broke out he fought in the invasion of Greece in summer 1941 , then against the Soviet Red Army in northern Finland before transferring to the Waffen @-@ SS in 1943 .

Raithel subsequently commanded a regiment of the newly formed 13th Waffen Mountain Division of the SS Handschar (1st Croatian) and led it during fighting against the Yugoslav Partisans in the Independent State of Croatia . Raithel was seriously wounded in mid @-@ 1944 and was replaced . When a new Waffen @-@ SS division was to be raised in June 1944 , the cadre was provided by the 13th SS Division and Raithel was appointed as the divisional commander . The 23rd Waffen Mountain Division of the SS Kama (2nd Croatian) never reached full divisional strength and did not see action as a formation , but elements of the division fought briefly in southern Hungary in early October 1944 . Raithel quickly suppressed a mutiny by the Bosnian Muslim soldiers of the division in mid @-@ October 1944 , but it was disbanded and its reliable troops were absorbed by the 13th SS Division and the 31st SS Volunteer Grenadier Division . Raithel was then appointed to command a regiment of 6th SS Mountain Division Nord in Alsace , where his regiment fought the United States Army . He received a serious head wound during fighting northeast of Frankfurt in early April 1945 and was captured by the Americans .

Raithel recovered from his wounds and had a career in agriculture after the war , working in South Africa for many years . He returned to Bavaria when he retired and earned a doctorate of history from the University of Munich . His interest in mountaineering continued and he regularly climbed in the Alps into his seventies . He maintained contact with his former comrades from the 6th SS Division , attending many reunions . On 12 September 1990 at the age of 82 , he was returning home from the Semmering Pass in eastern Austria when he was killed in a traffic accident .

= = Early life = =

Born Helmuth Hans Walter Paul Raithel in Ingolstadt , Kingdom of Bavaria , a federated state of the German Empire , on 9 April 1907 , he was the second son of a Bavarian Army officer . Raithel attended primary school then the Wittelsbacher @-@ Gymnasium München (secondary school) until 1926 . On 9 November 1923 at the age of 16 , Raithel was walking his bicycle in Munich when he stumbled across the Beer Hall Putsch being led by Adolf Hitler . Swept up in the excitement , he fell in with a group led by Freikorps veteran Gerhard Roßbach . After shots were fired , he took cover with some of the group in an alley , one of whom wrote down Raithel 's name as one of the " party faithful " present that day . He was subsequently awarded the highly prized Nazi Party Blood Order , although he apparently did not have any political beliefs and was not a member of the Party at the time .

After he successfully completed secondary school in early 1926 , he joined the Reichswehr as a offizieranwärter (officer cadet) on 1 April 1926 . He was posted to the 19th Infantry Regiment during which he spent four years commanding a Gebirgsjäger (mountain infantry) platoon . While he was with the regiment , the Reichswehr was absorbed by the Wehrmacht . Now part of the Gebirgs Brigade , Raithel gained experience as a signals officer and company commander , and was promoted to Hauptmann (captain) . With the creation of the 1st Gebirgs Division in April 1938 he was appointed as the adjutant of the 99th Gebirgsjäger Regiment . At the outbreak of war in September 1939 he was an instructor at the mountain infantry school at Fulpmes in the Stubai Alps . He was married and he and his wife had two daughters .

= = World War II = =

== = Greece and Finland == =

In August 1940 , Raithel was transferred from instructional duties to command a battalion of the newly formed 6th Gebirgs Division , which had been deployed to France on occupation duty in anticipation of involvement in the planned invasion of the United Kingdom , Operation Sealion . When Sealion was abandoned , the division was sent first to Poland then in spring 1941 took part in the invasion of Greece . During the Battle of Metaxas Line in early April 1941 , the division , led by Generalmajor (Brigadier) Ferdinand Schörner , breached the formidable Greek defences by crossing a 2 @, @ 100 @-@ metre (6 @, @ 900 ft) snow @-@ covered mountain pass considered inaccessible by the Greeks . This enabled the division to cut the rail line to Thessaloniki .

Raithel was awarded the Iron Cross 1st Class in late April 1941 . Following the defeat of Greece and its allies , the division was deployed to Lapland in northern Finland in September 1941 . Raithel remained as a battalion commander with the 143rd Gebirgsjäger Regiment of the division in Finland and was promoted to Major on 1 November 1941 . Schörner became Raithel 's mentor during their service with the 6th Gebirgs Division . In January 1942 he was awarded the German Cross in Gold . In August 1942 he was transferred to the Oberkommando des Heeres (Army Headquarters) reserve pool for an extended period , during which he returned to the mountain infantry school then served briefly with the 133rd Fortress Division on Crete . He was promoted to Oberstleutnant (lieutenant colonel) on 1 October 1943 .

== = Yugoslavia == =

In 1943 , his mentor Schörner , now a General der Gebirgstruppe (lieutenant general) , advised him to transfer to the quickly expanding Waffen @-@ SS where regimental command would be easier to come by , particularly as his Blood Order was especially prized in the Waffen @-@ SS . Raithel subsequently transferred to the Waffen @-@ SS (and Allgemeine SS) on 30 November 1943 , but still did not join the Nazi Party . He was immediately appointed to command a regiment of the newly formed 13th Waffen Mountain Division of the SS Handschar (1st Croatian) , the rank @-@ and @-@ file of which were mostly Bosnian Muslims . Initially appointed as an SS @-@ Obersturmbannführer (lieutenant colonel) commanding the 28th Waffen Gebirgsjäger Regiment , he oversaw the completion of his regiment 's training at the Neuhammer training grounds in the Silesian region of Germany (present @-@ day Poland) then led his regiment to fight the Yugoslav Partisans in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) in February 1944 . The division was given the primary role of securing around 6 @, @ 000 square kilometres (2 @, @ 300 sq mi) of territory (the designated security zone) in north @-@ eastern Bosnia within the NDH . The security zone encompassed the Posavina , Semberija and Majevisa regions between the Sava , Bosna , Drina and Spre?a rivers . Reichsführer @-@ SS Heinrich Himmler saw this task as critical to the safeguarding of important agricultural areas and Volksdeutsche (ethnic German) settlements in the Syrmia region to the north .

Between March and June 1944 Raithel commanded his regiment during several major operations , including what may have been the largest anti @-@ Partisan sweep of the war , Operation Maibaum (Maypole) . He was promoted to SS @-@ Standartenführer (colonel) on 1 April 1944 . Raithel led his regiment well , resulting in a serious wound in June 1944 . On 11 June 1944 , he was recommended for an award of the Knight 's Cross of the Iron Cross citing his leadership and courage while commanding the regiment , but it was not approved . While it achieved successes and proved itself competent in counter @-@ insurgency operations against the Partisans in eastern Bosnia between March and August 1944 , the 13th SS Division earned a reputation for brutality and savagery , not only during combat operations , but also through atrocities committed against Serb civilians in the security zone .

When a second Bosnian Muslim Waffen @-@ SS division was to be raised in June 1944 , the cadre was provided by the 13th SS Division and Raithel was appointed as the divisional commander . The 23rd Waffen Mountain Division of the SS Kama (2nd Croatian) never reached full divisional

strength and did not see action as a formation , but elements of the division fought briefly in southern Hungary in early October 1944 . The Bosnian Muslim members of the division mutinied on 17 October 1944 , but Raithel quickly gained control over the situation . Following the mutiny , the division was formally disbanded on 31 October and reliable elements were absorbed by the 13th SS Division and the 31st SS Volunteer Grenadier Division .

= = = Germany = = =

After a short time convalescing as part of the SS Führungshauptamt (SS headquarters) reserve pool , Raithel was appointed to command the 11th Gebirgsjäger Regiment of the 6th SS Mountain Division Nord in December 1944 . In early January 1945 , the division was located around Pirmasens near the French @-@ Reich border , reeling from their losses in what was the last major German offensive of World War II on the Western Front , Operation Nordwind . Committed to a series of desperate counterattacks against the United States Army XV Corps , on one occasion Raithel 's regiment infiltrated the American positions , surrounding five US infantry companies and taking 450 prisoners of war . The fighting depleted the already understrength regiment , with one company numbering only eight men by 20 January . The commander of one of the US battalions they fought in January 1945 ruefully described Raithel 's regiment as , " the best men we ever ran into , extremely aggressive , and impossible to capture . There was no driving them out , for they fought until they were killed " .

After a quiet period in February 1945 absorbing replacements , the division was withdrawn from the defensive line and ordered to recapture Trier from the US Army . This attack started on 7 March in freezing conditions but after limited success a fresh US offensive struck the division and forced them back north of Mainz . By 19 March , Raithel 's regiment had been converted into a kampfguppe (battlegroup) consisting of two gebirgsjäger battalions , a mountain artillery battalion , a pioneer company and eight anti @-@ tank guns . Two weeks later they were fighting their way out of encirclement near Limburg . On 1 April 1945 , " Kampfgruppe Raithel " and the rest of what remained of the division drove east . Shortly afterwards , Raithel received a serious head wound and was captured . The remnants of the division disintegrated over the next few days and weeks and were captured by the Americans .

= = Personal life = =

Raithel recovered from his wounds and had a career in agriculture after the war , working in South Africa for many years . He returned to Bavaria when he retired and earned a doctorate of history from the University of Munich . He continued with mountaineering and regularly climbed in the Alps into his seventies . He maintained contact with his former comrades from the 6th SS Division Nord and attended many reunions . On 12 September 1990 at the age of 82 , he was returning home from the Semmering Pass in eastern Austria when he was killed in a traffic accident .

= = Career = =

Raithel received the following promotions during his career , after joining the Reichswehr as an officer cadet on 1 April 1926 :

= = = Reichswehr = = =

Leutnant - 1 June 1930

Oberleutnant - 1 July 1932

= = = Wehrmacht = = =

Hauptmann - 1 April 1937

Major - 1 November 1941
Oberstleutnant - 1 October 1943

== Waffen @-@ SS ==

SS @-@ Obersturmbannführer - 1 December 1943
SS @-@ Standartenführer - 2 April 1944

== Awards ==

Raithel received the following awards during his service :

German Cross in Gold

Iron Cross First Class

Infantry Assault Badge

Eastern Front Medal

Order of Bravery (Fourth Grade , First Class) (Kingdom of Bulgaria)