

The 78th Assault Division

Throughout World War II, most German designs for infantry divisions were variations on the same theme. In addition to the usual logistics, headquarters, and reconnaissance elements, each consisted of two or three infantry regiments, a field artillery regiment, a mobile anti-tank reaction force, and an engineer battalion. Even the *Volks Grenadier* divisions of 1944, which were created in response to severe shortages of both manpower and horsepower, conformed to this basic pattern.

Formations that deviated sharply from this basic pattern were rare. The 90th and 164th Light Divisions, with infantry and artillery battalions capable of serving as antitank units, were custom tailored for the peculiar demands of warfare in the deserts of North Africa. The *Großdeutschland* Division was a conventional *Panzer Grenadier* Division beefed up with an extraordinarily generous allotment of anti-tank and infantry guns.

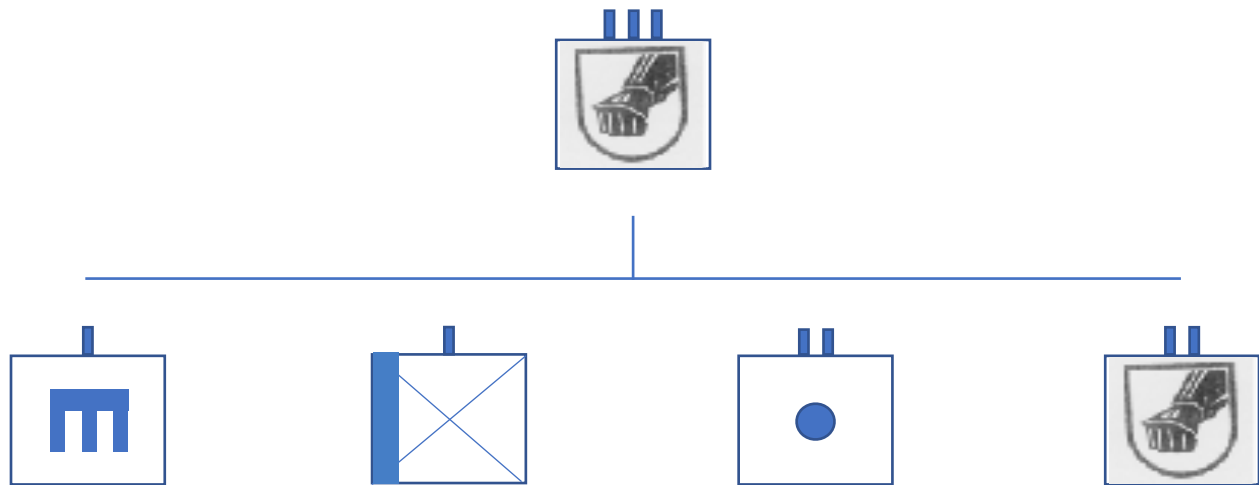
For all their peculiarities, neither the two “African” divisions nor *Großdeutschland* diverged from the standard pattern to the same degree as the 78th Assault Division (*Sturmdivision*.) This latter formation was not merely an adaptation of the old pattern to new circumstances, but a serious attempt on the German Army High Command to design a division on entirely new principles.



**Emblems of the
78th Infantry Division and 78th Assault Division**

The 78th Assault Division was officially formed on the 1st of January, 1943 from the 78th Infantry Division, a formation that had suffered heavy losses on the Russian Front. While it was being reorganized, the division was kept under the direct control of the Army High Command. This not only ensured that the experiment could be properly monitored, but also prevented hard-pressed army corps and field armies from redistributing the often hard-to-get weapons with which the new division was so richly provided.

The basic building blocks of the 78th Assault Division were the three assault regiments (*Sturmregimente*). Created from the 78th Infantry Division's three infantry regiments, the assault regiments were not, strictly speaking, infantry units. Rather, with their extraordinarily generous allocation of heavy anti-tank weapons and their organic field artillery battalions, they were combined arms formations on a small scale.



The first battalion of each of the assault regiments was the assault battalion (*Sturmabteilung*). This, according to the orders of the Army High Command, was to consist of four identical assault companies (*Sturmkompanien*). The assault companies were each armed with nineteen light machine guns, two heavy machine guns, two 81^{mm} mortars, and six 75^{mm} anti-tank guns.

The second battalion of the assault regiment was a field artillery battalion of nine 105mm howitzers. This battalion, drawn from the artillery regiment of old 78th Infantry Division, was not merely in direct support of the assault regiment. According to the design promulgated by the Army High Command, it was to be as much an organic part of the assault regiment as the assault battalion and the independent companies.

Still more firepower was provided to the assault regiment in the form of an infantry heavy company reminiscent of those of contemporary mountain and light infantry battalions. This company was authorized four infantry guns (two 75^{mm} light pieces and two 150^{mm} heavy pieces), six medium (81^{mm}) mortars, and eight heavy machine guns.

The fourth maneuver element of the assault regiment was the infantry pioneer company. Made up of elements of the recently dissolved divisional pioneer battalion reinforced by infantrymen cross-trained as combat engineers, this unit contained three pioneer platoons (armed with three light machine guns each), two medium mortars, and six portable flamethrowers.

Source: Tables of organization for the 78th Assault Division microfilmed at the U.S. National Archives, Captured German Records, Series T-315, Reel 1099 and Series T-78, Reel 620.