



Black Edelweiss: A Memoir of Combat and Conscience by a Soldier of the Waffen-SS

Johann Voss

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Originally written while the author was a prisoner of the US Army in 1945–46, *Black Edelweiss* is a boon to serious historians and WWII buffs alike. In a day in which most memoirs are written at half a century's distance, the former will be gratified by the author's precise recall facilitated by the chronologically short-range (a matter of one to seven years) at which the events were captured in writing. Both will appreciate and enjoy the abundantly detailed, exceptionally accurate combat episodes.

Even more than the strictly military narrative, however, the author has crafted a searingly candid view into his own mind and soul. As such, *Black Edelweiss* is much more than a "ripping yarn" or a low-level military history. *Black Edelweiss* joins not only the growing body of German military memoirs, but the more select, more narrowly-focused group of personal memoirs by other *Waffen-SS* enlisted men. Beyond the microcosmic view of combat these books relate—to the extent that they are honest and candid—such books are important for what they can reveal about their authors' motivations and reflections on those impulses and their consequences. To date, these works differ significantly.

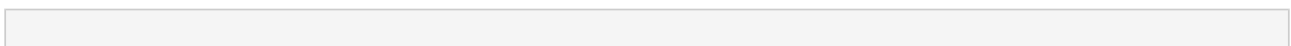
As it joins the ranks of the books in this genre, *Black Edelweiss* makes a unique and very important contribution. It is a true, personal account of the author's war years, first at school and then with the *Waffen-SS*, which he joined early in 1943 at the age of seventeen. For a year and a half, the author fought as a machine gunner in SS-Mountain Infantry Regiment 11 "Reinhard Heydrich," mainly in the arctic and sub-arctic reaches of Soviet Karelia and Finland, and later at the Western frontier of the Third Reich. The characters in the story are real, and the conversations and actions are recounted to the best of his ability from the short distance at which he wrote the manuscript in 1945–46.

Apart from the piercing insights into the question of why the German soldier fought as he did, what makes this book truly unique is the author's anguished, yet resolute examination of the dialectic between the honorable and valorous comportment of his comrades and the fundamentally reprehensible conduct of about 35,000 men behind the front lines who nevertheless wore the same uniform.

During his captivity, the author was assigned for a time as a clerk to a US Army Judge Advocate General's Corps officer, and in the performance of his administrative duties, the author had access to the mounting reams of documentation of the Holocaust. His growing recognition of the involvement of *Waffen-SS* personnel in the monstrous crimes of that process caused him to dig deeply into his soul, to examine his most intimate and private motivations and thoughts, and to reevaluate the most basic assumptions of his life to that point. The author captured this process and the result in the notes which became this book.

Honestly, forthrightly, and courageously told, *Black Edelweiss* is a precious gift to historians and other students of World War II. It not only provides a glimpse into the attributes that made the German armed forces a formidable and tenacious foe, but squarely confronts the most painful issue facing German World War II veterans in general, and *Waffen-SS* veterans in particular.

Supported by 22 photos, 8 maps, and notes.



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