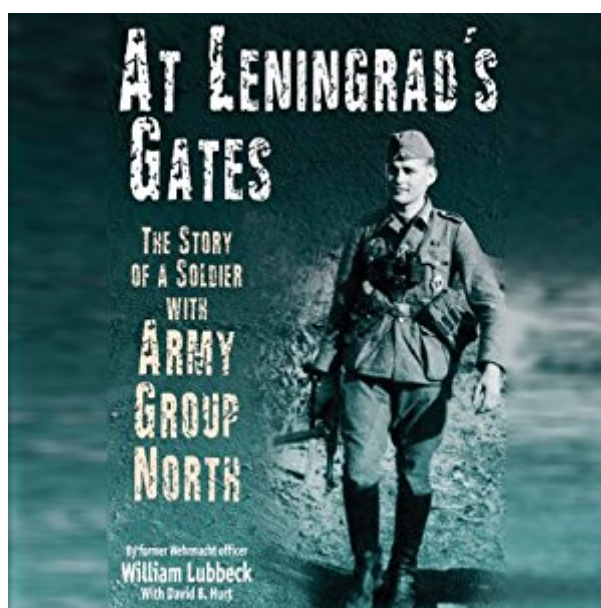


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# At Leningrad's Gates: The Combat Memoirs Of A Soldier With Army Group North



## Synopsis

This is the remarkable story of a German soldier who fought throughout World War II, rising from conscript private to captain of a heavy weapons company on the Eastern Front. William Lubbeck, age 19, was drafted into the Wehrmacht in August 1939. As a member of the 58th Infantry Division, he received his baptism of fire during the 1940 invasion of France. The following spring his division served on the left flank of Army Group North in Operation Barbarossa. After grueling marches amidst countless Russian bodies, burnt-out vehicles, and a great number of cheering Baltic civilians, Lubbeck's unit entered the outskirts of Leningrad, making the deepest penetration of any German formation. The Germans suffered brutal hardships the following winter as they fought both Russian counterattacks and the brutal cold. The 58th Division was thrown back and forth across the front of Army Group North, from Novgorod to Demyansk, at one point fighting back Russian attacks on the ice of Lake Ilmen. Returning to the outskirts of Leningrad, the 58th was placed in support of the Spanish "Blue" Division. Relations between the allied formations soured at one point when the Spaniards used a Russian bath house for target practice, not realizing that Germans were relaxing inside. A soldier who preferred to be close to the action, Lubbeck served as forward observer for his company, dueling with Russian snipers, partisans and full-scale assaults alike. His worries were not confined to his own safety; however, as news arrived of disasters in Germany, including the destruction of Hamburg where his girlfriend served as an Army nurse. In September 1943, Lubbeck earned the Iron Cross First Class and was assigned to officers' training school in Dresden. By the time he returned to Russia, Army Group North was in full-scale retreat. Now commanding his former heavy weapons company, Lubbeck alternated sharp counterattacks with inexorable withdrawal, from Riga to Memel on the Baltic. In April 1945 Lubbeck's company became stalled in a traffic jam and was nearly obliterated by a Russian barrage followed by air attacks. In the last chaotic scramble from East Prussia, Lubbeck was able to evacuate on a newly minted German destroyer. He recounts how the ship arrived in the British zone off Denmark with all guns blazing against pursuing Russians. The following morning, May 8, 1945, he learned that the war was over. After his release from British captivity, Lubbeck married his sweetheart, Anneliese, and in 1949 immigrated to the United States where he raised a successful family. With the assistance of David B. Hurt, he has drawn on his wartime notes and letters, Soldatbuch, regimental history and personal memories to recount his four years of frontline experience. Containing rare firsthand accounts of both triumph and disaster, *At Leningrad's Gates* provides a fascinating glimpse into the reality of combat on the Eastern Front.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I enjoyed this book for a different reason than I expected to when ordering it. I am very fascinated by the human experiences of people who live through enduring things, and I also love military history, I have either read or listened to a number of books that focus on these topics. I didn't take away much from the military portions of the story. Much of it was not particularly new or interesting for me personally, and if that was all the book had in it, I would have been disappointed, but this book has much more than that in it. This book has sections that discuss Lubbeck's life growing up in a German village, his time at officer school, what he did when on leave from the front, his life in a soviet prison camp, and his thoughts on being a German soldier who moved to Canada and then the US later in life. All of these sections are far more fascinating and I found them to lend incredible background information to other works that I have read. I particularly found the parts surrounding the soviet prison camp particularly interesting. In short, this book is not really focused on combat that much. If you are looking for that maybe consider something else, but if you are interested in the human experience aspect, this is a good read.

William Lubbeck has given a human face to the German soldier fighting in WWII. He takes us from the very start of change in Germany with his life on a small farm that will seem familiar to any American who grew up working a farm. His life closely resembles our own before the war. His family, hopes and dreams as well as his first love. We see how Hitler slowly gained full control over a people who wanted nothing more than to regain a lost status after the "Great War" where England

and France had crippled the nation. When we are taken to war with this young man we learn first hand just how they suffered by being loyal...blindly following orders, a lesson we should take a closer look at. Like all men who go to war it changed him, deepened friendships with his fellow soldiers and in the end they fought not for their country but for each other. All too often we fail to see our enemy as human, William Lubbeck has given us a face that looks so much like our own that for a time I stood in the boots of my enemy and saw myself.

I read it but I wouldn't read it again. Maybe it was because I had recently read *The Forgotten Soldier* by Guy Sajer. *The Forgotten Soldier* is a much better account. I even enjoy the fiction books by Sven Hassel more. I AM glad I read it though. It is very interesting to read about any history through the words of the losers... it is the only way to get a true picture of history in my opinion. Even when reading about the American Civil War, the diaries and autobiographies of soldiers are what tell the rest of the story... it is the same with Germany and WW II. The allied versions, books and movies are really slanted and indict ALL the regular soldiers. Most, you'll find were not Nazis, they were just Germans and joined the army. The politics and bios of generals and such are totally different. Read this book, you won't be disappointed but read others too. They come together to paint a different picture from the one we know. Yes, Hitler and Himmler were as bad as they come but the soldier in the Wehrmacht were mostly just young men doing their patriotic duty and in their minds, liberating people from communism. Read *The Forgotten Soldier* too... if you want to know more about WW II.

This was a good written account of a soldier who participated in the northern part of the assault on Russia. It's very well structured and covers the author's entire life. But, for me, I find that the descriptions of the battles are a bit on the meager side. I've never had the feeling that they suffered heavily. Also the romantic side is omnipresent. But altogether it's a good, easy readable book.

When I was in school, I learned that the difference between an autobiography and a memoir was principally one of focus. An autobiography is the story of your life, and a memoir is the story of one particular aspect of your life. Although the line is not always clear, it remains an important distinction, because most people's working life is far more interesting than their daily one. The biography of a test-pilot whose hobby is planting geraniums would probably be less interesting than his memoir. I've found this true of German WW2 writings as well. With some exceptions, guys like Hans Rudel, Günther Koschorrek, and F.W. von Mellenthin, who stick largely to their combat experiences, tend to be somewhat more interesting than guys like Klaus Haffner, Philip

Freiherr von Boeselager, or Georg Grossjohan, who paint with a much broader brush. AT LENINGRAD'S GATES is a biography, or at least more of a biography than it is a memoir, and because of this, I found it less interesting, taken as a whole, than some of the other books I just mentioned. While no means without merit, and in many instances quite gripping and even horrifying, it is important for the reader to know going in that in this book, he is dealing with the sum of a man's life and not just the "hot lead and cold steel" part of it. Wilhelm Löffelbecke was born in Pöggendorf, a farming town in north-central Germany, just two years after the end of the Great War. His parents were hard-working, religious, conservative-minded folk who instilled the same sort of values in their son, values which stood him in good stead during the Great Depression. Because of these values, he never warmed to the Nazis, but like most Germans was more than willing to fight for his country's interests when the war broke out in 1939. Seeing his first action in France as a private soldier, Löffelbecke was sent east in 1941 to participate in the invasion of Russia, and somehow survived the entire campaign, including the calamitous last days of April and May, 1945, rising to the rank of captain in the process. After the war he consummated his years-long romance with sweetheart Annalise, and then engaged in the bitter postwar struggle against starvation, finally electing to emigrate to Canada in 1951 to find work. At last achieving success as an engineer, he eventually moved to America, became a citizen, raised a family, and retired in good health - a rather remarkable example of the American dream in action. Löffelbecke's war service was entirely with the 58th Division, which belonged to Army Group North, the group of German forces which besieged Leningrad from 1941 until 1944 (hence the title of the book). A veteran of such horrible battles as Demyansk and Wolchow, he has many great anecdotes to relate - calling down artillery fire on Soviet tanks, listening as Red Army soldiers shouted over No Man's Land that they were going to mutilate his corpse, fleeing enemy capture on the deck of a Navy destroyer -- but his tendency to speak in generalities sometimes gives the book a disconnected feeling, almost as if he is using conventional history texts to fill the gaps in his memory. What's more, while almost every chapter is seemingly devoted to his military service, and while Löffelbecke himself was obviously a superb soldier, he was by temperament a romantic whose heart was not in the war, but rather back home with his beloved Annalise. As a result, his war experiences often come off rather flat, while the passages about home and family tend to have more passion. This creates the false, but strong, impression, that one is reading much more about his family life and much less about his military one. What's more, Löffelbecke spends quite a bit of time insisting that he was not a Nazi, that no German soldiers he knew were Nazis, that nobody was fighting for Nazism but only for Germany, etc., etc. This may in fact be his experience, but he resorts to the mantra so frequently it

becomes a bit tedious. I don't want to discourage anyone from reading this book. Quite the contrary. If you want to read the saga (and it really is a saga) of Wilhelm Lübbecke, who began his life as a Prussian farm-boy in the 1920s, and finally ended up as the patriotic American citizen "William Lubbeck" in the 1960s, while earning himself an Iron Cross in between, then this is for you. If you want nonstop action, or a book that simply immerses you in German military life without "emotional distraction", I'd suggest Kurt Meyer or Gottlob Bidermann.

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