

## *Non-German Waffen-SS Holders of the German Cross in Gold*



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**The first photo is actually of a German NCO, SS-Oberscharführer Fritz Krupt, just to illustrate the German Cross in Gold and its positioning on the lower right portion of the uniform tunic. [Erik Rundkvist Archives]**

**T**he award of the German Cross in Gold was probably second in importance to only that of the Knight's Cross. It was given to soldiers who already held both classes of the Iron Cross and would have been entitled to more if this had been a "multiple" decoration such as the U.S. bronze or silver stars. Actually it usually required numerous acts of bravery, any of one of which would have qualified for an Iron Cross if the recipient already didn't have that decoration. The Knight's Cross could be given for single or multiple "spectacular" achievements. At any rate it was a prestigious medal, adopted during the war to fully recognize heroic achievements that went beyond the Iron Cross, 1st Class but fell short of the Knight's Cross award.

There were at least 27 documented European volunteer holders of the German Cross in Gold of whom 16 were Latvians, which helps to demonstrate their extensive military contributions to the war against the Soviet Union. Below is a listing of these brave soldiers by their nationalities. Some went on to receive the Knight's Cross and in the case of Leon Degrelle, the Oakleaves to the Knight's Cross. But not all not all Knight's Cross recipients held the German Cross in Gold!

## DENMARK

- SS-Sturmbannführer Per Sörensen (1913-1945), Award made to him on 14 October 1944 while serving as an SS- Hauptsturmführer and company commander in the SS- Pz.Gr.Rgt.24 "Danmark" of the 11.SS Volunteers Pz.Gr. Division "Nordland". He would later serve as a battalion and regimental commander with "Danmark" and be killed in Berlin by a "friendly" sniper!
- SS-Hauptsturmführer Johannes Helmers (1918-1999). He received his decoration on 18 December 1944, while serving as an SS-Obersturmführer and commander of 6th Company/SS- Pz.Gr.Rgt.49 "De Ruyter" (Dutch Nr.1) of the "Nederland" Assault Brigade/Division. He would later also received the Knight's Cross.

## ESTONIA

Waffen-Hstuf. der SS Hando Ruus (1917-1945). A decorated company commander in the "Narva" Battalion of the "Wiking" Division, Ruus perhaps had the strangest fate of the German Cross in Gold recipients. While leading the Fusilier Battalion of the 20th Estonian SS Division in a desperate attempt to break through a Soviet encirclement on 22 September 1944, Ruus was captured by the Reds. The captives from this battle were then taken back to the now communist-occupied Estonian capital of Tallinn and paraded before the citizenry, then shipped off to labor camps in Russia. However, while in captivity, Ruus was decorated with the German Cross in Gold on 30 December 1944. Whether or not the news of this occurrence led to his further fate is unknown, but in March 1945, he was executed by the Soviets in Leningrad! He of course, had committed only the "crime" of fighting for his country against the communists! See Estonian Vikings by your editor and the late Erik Rundkvist for photos and more information on Hando Ruus.

## FINLAND

SS-Ostuf. Ola Olin (1917-1995). Olin was decorated with the German Cross in Gold on 28 February 1945 while serving as a platoon leader in 7th Company/SS- Pz.Rgt.5/5.SS Pz.Division "Wiking". Although he had joined the Waffen-SS with the

Finnish Volunteer Battalion (III./SS Rgt. "Nordland"), he later transferred into the "Wiking" Panzer Regiment and became a tank commander.



**The Finnish volunteer SS-Ostuf. Ola Olin.**

Although he could have returned to Finland with his fellow countrymen in May 1943, he stayed with the "Wiking" Division until the end of the war. After being credited with destroying 34 enemy tanks and 11 anti-tank artillery guns, Olin went into American captivity in May 1945.

## **HOLLAND**

- SS-Hauptscharführer Frans Venemen (1914- ). Frans Venemen received his decoration on 24 April 1944 while serving as a platoon leader in 3rd Company/SS-Pz.Gr.Rgt.48 "General Seyffardt" (Dutch Nr.2) of the "Nederland" Sturmbrigade. He was badly wounded shortly thereafter and seems to have never returned to active duty.
- SS-Ostuf. Gerrit-Jan Pulles (1923-1945), received the German Cross in Gold on 18 December 1944 for heroism in Kurland, Latvia while serving as an SS-Ustuf. and commander of 3rd Company/SS-Pz.Gr.Rgt.49/23.SS-Volunteer Pz.Gr.Div. "Nederland". During the division's heavy fighting for Reetz, Pomerania in March 1945, Pulles became missing in action. His father had been the mayor of Eindhoven, Holland.

## HUNGARY

Waffen-Hstuf. der SS György vitez Hermandy Berencz received a posthumous award of the German Cross in Gold on 23 March 1945 for heroic actions in the defense of the Neuhammer Training Camp. He had been commander of I./Waffen-Grenadier Rgt. der SS 65/26.Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS "Hunyadi" (Hungary Nr.2) and IV. Waffen-Alarm Regiment der SS (Hungarian) during the battle for Neuhammer. He had also been recommended for the Knight's Cross, which was never officially awarded (although a German Wehrmacht officer placed his own KC around Hermandy's neck after the battle). The first post-war "free" Hungarian government in the 1990's honored him by posthumously promoting him to the rank of Colonel!

## LATVIA

- Waffen-Standartenführer der SS Vilis Janums (1894-1981) received the award in March 1945 while serving as commander of Waffen-Grenadier Rgt. der SS 33 /15.Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (Latvia Nr.1), in Pomerania. He would survive the war in the west.



**The Latvian Waffen-Ostuf. Nikolajs Galdins and regimental commander with all of his wartime decorations including the German Cross in Gold on his right breast pocket.**

- **Waffen-Ostuf.** Nikolajs Galdins (1902-1945) was awarded the German Cross in Gold on 25 January 1945 while commanding Waffen-Grenadier Rgt. der SS 42/19. Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (Latvia Nr.2) in the desperate defensive fighting for Kurland. One of the most highly decorated Latvian volunteers, Galdins was also decorated with the Knight's Cross and the Close Combat Clasp in Gold. He would be executed (murdered) in Soviet captivity in October 1945!
- **Waffen-Ustuf.** Karlis Musins (1919-1955) was awarded the German Cross in Gold on 8 May 1945 while serving as CO of 4./Waf.Gr.Rgt.d.SS 42 "Voldermars Veiss" with the 19th Latvian SS Division in Kurland. After the war, Musins took to the woods with many of his fellow soldiers and led a band of freedom fighting partisans against the Soviet occupation of his country. He was captured by the Reds in 1955 and subsequently executed (murdered) on 2 June 1955.



**Waffen-Ostuf.** Rudolf Gaitars (here a W.-Ustuf.), wearing his German Cross in Gold.

- Waffen-Ostuf. Rudolf Gaitars (1907-1945), decorated with the German Cross in Gold on 11 May 1944 while commanding 7th Company of Waffen-Grenadier Regiment 42/19.Waffen- Grenadier Div.d.SS (Latvian Nr.2) in Latvia. Gaitars was badly wounded in Kurland in March 1945 and died in a field hospital in Kurland. His grave site along with those of 33 other Latvian and 170 German soldiers was made part of a pig farm by the Soviets after the war. In 1999 the bodies were exhumed and removed to a place of honor in the Frauenburg cemetery.
- Waffen-Hstuf. Georgs Seibelis (1913-1970), had his German Cross in Gold awarded on 27 January 1945 while he commanded ILBtl./WGRdSS 42/"VV"/19.WGDdSS in Kurland. He went into Soviet captivity after the war and was held in slave labor camps until 1961!
- Waffen-Ostuf. Miervaldis Ziedanis (1915-1946), was awarded the German Cross in Gold on 8 May 1945 while leading 13th Company (Infantry Gun - close support artillery), of WGRdSS 42 "VV" of the 19th Latvian SS Division. He went into Soviet captivity and was executed by them in 1946.
- Waffen-Standartenführer Karlis Lobe (1895-1995), was one of the senior and most distinguished Latvian volunteers. He received the German Cross in Gold on 28 June 1944 while leading WGRdSS "Voldemars Veiss" of the 19th Latvian SS Division. After the war he was able to move to Sweden where he died at the age of 100 in 1995.
- Waffen-Ostuf. Voldemars Reinholds (1903-1986), was decorated with the German Cross in Gold on 28 November 1944 while commanding I.Btl./WGRdSS 42 "VV"/19.WGDdSS (Latvia Nr.2) On 15 March 1945 he became the CO of WGRdSS 43 "Hinrich Schuldt" in Kurland and led it until the end of the war. After the surrender he took off into the forests with some of his comrades to continue partisan warfare. Following four months his group decided to try to make their way to Germany but they were soon apprehended. While being truck transported to a place of execution (shooting in the back of the neck), Reinholds managed to leap from the vehicle and get away. For a time he lived with relatives in Tuksum and even in the house of his father in Kurmene, before going to Riga under an assumed name to work as an electrician. Here he got into contact with other old comrades also using false names. However one of them was apprehended by the KGB and was tortured into giving the others away, thus Reinholds was arrested on 21 August 1948. Voldemars Reinholds was then sentenced to 25 years at hard labor and was sent to the notorious Siberian Labor Camp of Vorkuta. He was amnestied on 1 August 1958 and returned to Riga where he was employed as an electrician until 1977. Although he was closely watched by the Soviet secret



police he was able to resume contact with other former Latvian SS officers, including the former Waffen-Stubaf. Gustavs Praudins, who was also under surveillance. But the Reds never caught on. Reinholds died in a hospital in Madliena on 4 July 1986 at the age of 83.

- Waffen-Stubaf. Eduards Stipnieks (1902-1983), received the award of the German Cross in Gold on 12 September 1944 while in charge of an improvised battle-group from WaffenGrenadier Rgt. der SS 43 "Hinrich Schuldt" of the 19th Latvian SS Division. In early May 1945, Stipnieks was named to a ministerial position in the newly independent Latvian government that had been established at that time in Kurland. However after the German surrender on 8 May 1945, Stipnieks and other members of the new regime decided to take a boat back to Germany rather than face probable execution by the Soviets. Stipnieks founded the Latvian Volunteer veteran's association, "Daugavas Vanagi" in 1947 and then emigrated to Australia in 1950. He died in Adelaide, Australia of heart disease in 1983.
- Waffen-Hstuf. Zaniz Butkus (1906-1999), was one of the most highly decorated Latvian volunteers who would also hold the Knight's Cross and was nominated for the Close Combat Clasp in Gold (he received the Clasp in Silver for certain). He was decorated with the German Cross in Gold while serving as commander of 10th Company/WGRdSS 43 "HS"/19th Latvian SS Division on 28 June 1944. The Knight's Cross would follow on 21 September 1941. Before the war Butkus was an athlete and professional soldier. He always placed very highly in international small caliber shooting competitions, and was in fact the champion in this category in the Baltic States in 1937. A volunteer from the first he distinguished himself time and again in combat situations. Badly wounded in 1944, Butkus was assigned to the Reserve and Replacement Battalion of the 15th Latvian SS Division in Denmark, where he ended the war. After the war he worked as a silver smith and in 1956 emigrated to the U.S. with his family, living in the Milwaukee area for some 30 years. He was also the "head" of the sports shooting society of the Latvian Veterans Association in North America. In the 1980's Zanis Butkus was hounded by the official U.S. "Nazi" hunters, a group of government funded racist thugs who are still active. They considered him a "war criminal" for having fought for his country against the Soviet Reds in a Latvian "self-defense" battalion. Despite this vicious harassment, he was never deported and he eventually moved to Alaska where he died in 1999. His military decorations eventually found their way to the "collector's" market after his death.
- Waffen-Ostuf. Rudolf Kocins (1907-1990), was decorated with the German Cross in Gold on 29 January 1945 while commanding Waffen-Grenadier

Regiment der SS 44 of the 19th Latvian SS Division. Due to illness he was soon transferred to the Inspectorate of the Waffen-SS and when Germany surrendered he was among the high ranking Latvian officers and officials who were evacuated by sea to Germany. He died in exile in that country in 1990.

- **Waffen-Stubaf. Gustavs Praudins** (1899-1965) won the German Cross in Gold on 7 January 1944 while he commanded I./WGRdSS 44/19.WGDdSS (Latvian Nr.2). A career military officer, he quickly volunteered for duty when the Soviets were pushed out of Latvia in the summer of 1941. He would subsequently command a Latvian Self-Defense Company and Battalion (Nr.19). In May 1942 his battalion was sent to the SS- Kampfgruppe "Jeckeln" which was fighting on the Leningrad Front. Praudins became disillusioned with the German treatment of his unit (i.e. like "cannon fodder" to him) and the heavy casualties it soon sustained, and in August 1942 he deserted his command and returned to Riga. Obviously the consequences of this act were severe. He was soon arrested and sentenced to death on 29 August 1942.



**Waffen-Stubaf. Gustavs Praudins wearing his German Cross in Gold and other decorations.**



Fortunately the sentence was not immediately carried out and he was incarcerated in the central jail in Riga. The sentence had to be reviewed by higher authorities including Reichsführer-SS Himmler. Himmler decided that while Praudins had acted illegally he did have some legitimate complaints and on 11 February 1943 he reduced to his sentence to five years imprisonment with the additional proviso that Praudins could rehabilitate himself by serving as a private in the Latvian Legion on the Leningrad Front. In short order he distinguished himself in numerous assault troop and raiding operations with Waffen-Gr.Rgt. der SS 39 (Latvian Nr.1) and in the summer of 1943, the head of the Latvian Waffen-SS Inspectorate, SS-Gruf. Bangerskis, officially requested his "rehabilitation" while SS- Ogruf. Jekeln felt that he was worthy of a high German military decoration. In any event, it took about another year for him to get back his old rank. Praudins transferred to the new Waf.Gr.Rgt.der SS 44 in January 1944 and would be decorated with both classes of the Iron Cross, the Close Combat Clasp in Bronze, the Infantry Assault Badge in Silver and the Wound Badge in Black. In July 1944 he was placed in command of a company in the 44th Regiment before taking over the I.Battalion. He would constantly win the highest praise of his commanders, both Latvian and Germans and in March 1945 would take command of Waf.Gr.Rgt.der SS 44 with the rank of Waf.-Stubaf. and lead it with success until the end of the war. After the war, Praudins tried to conceal his identity for a time but was taken into captivity by the Soviets on 5 June 1945. He would then be held in slave labor camps until 1961. During that time a leg would have to be amputated due to wartime wounds and his health was completely broken. Following his release from captivity, Praudins returned to Riga and worked for awhile as a draftsman before his death in 1965. He also was able to make secret contact with some of his old comrades including the former Waf.-Stubaf. Voldemars Reinholds, who was also a Knight's Cross holder.

- Waffen-Hstuf. Visvaldis Graumanis (1913-1944), was awarded the German Cross in Gold posthumously for continuous acts of heroism on 9 January 1945. In September 1944, while commanding II.Battalion/Waf.Gr.Rgt.der SS 44, Graumanis had held off a strong Soviet attack with his battalion but absorbed a severe head wound in the process. A little more than a month previously he had also been wounded while defending a Latvian bridgehead but that time had stayed at the front with his troops. After the head injury he had to be evacuated to Germany and he would die in a military hospital in the Sudetenland in December 1944. His last wounding had been the 7th that he had received in combat during the war. An obituary called him one of the "bravest Latvian volunteers of them all", high praise indeed considering the supreme courage demonstrated by most of his countrymen!
- Waffen-Ustuf. Janis Pikelis (1915-?), was decorated with the German Cross in Gold on 8 May 1945 for heroic actions while leading the bicycle

reconnaissance platoon of WGRdSS 44/19th Latvian SS Division. His 40 man platoon had distinguished itself for stopping Soviet breakthroughs, counterattacking and rescuing prisoners from behind enemy lines on several occasions. Pikelis disappeared at the end of the war, perhaps into a new identity and life.

- Waffen-Ostuf. Voldemars Gravelis (1900-?), received the German Cross in Gold and a promotion to Obersturmbannführer on 10 March 1945 while commanding Waffen-Artillerie Regiment der SS 19 of the 19th Latvian SS Division. At the end of the war Gravelis went into Soviet captivity and was said to have died in a labor camp in 1946; however he was spotted alive in another camp as late as 1949. He eventually vanished somewhere in the communist Gulag system.
- Waffen-Ostuf. Paulis Sprincis (1912- ), was decorated with the German Cross in Gold on 28 February 1945 while commanding 2nd Company/Waffen-Fusilier Btl.19 of the 19th Latvian SS Division. This was the division's reconnaissance battalion. After being wounded in combat for the fifth time in March 1945 he was evacuated to a military hospital in Germany. His brother had been killed in action in Kurland. At the end of the war, Sprincis lived in various POW and refugee camps before permanently immigrating to Australia in 1948. He was still alive in the year 2000.

## NORWAY

SS-Ostuf. Fredrik Jensen (1921- ), received the German Cross in Gold on 7 December 1944 while commanding 7th Co./SS-Pz.Gr.Rgt.9 "Germania" of the 5th SS Panzer Division "Wiking". Jensen was the most highly decorated Norwegian volunteer during the war. He had served with the "Der Führer" Regiment of the "Das Reich" Division during the first stages of the Russian campaign. After the war, and an escape from American captivity, Jensen made a new life for himself in Spain. At one point during his later travels he was detained and searched by American authorities while on a stopover in Hawaii because of his wartime "Nazi" status which placed him on a "watch list" and refused him entry to this country. This was another fine achievement by the official government "Nazi" hunter thugs. We managed to keep all of these good and decent people out, even other people with the same names(!), while being overrun by criminal aliens from all over the Third World!



**Fredrik Jensen in the uniform of a Germanic SS “Norge” Untersturmführer that originally appeared on the cover of SR #52. [Provided by Erik Norling]**

### **SWEDEN**

SS-Oscha. Sven-Erik Olsson (1923-1985), who was born into the Swedish community in Estonia, with a German mother and a Swedish father, was awarded the German Cross in Gold on 20 April 1945 while serving as commander of an armored radio car from 2 Company/Panzer Signals Detachment 10/10th SS Panzer Division “Frundsberg”. At the time Olsson handled the communications for the divisional HQ which enabled the division to escape total destruction by the Soviets and eventually break out of the Spremberg pocket. Incarcerated by the western allies, Olsson relocated to Sweden in 1947 and later worked for a large company in Stockholm. He died of a heart attack during a skiing vacation in 1985.

### **WALLONIA**

- SS-Ostuf. Lucien Lippert (1913-1944), was decorated with the German Cross in Gold posthumously on 20 February 1944 after being killed in action leading 5.SS-Sturmbrigade “Wallonie” in the battle for the Cherkassy Pocket.

He had been a career Belgian Army officer. After his death he was also promoted to the rank of SS-Obersturmbannführer. He was succeeded as brigade commander by SS-Hstuf. Leon Degrelle who then led the remnants of the unit in the breakout from the pocket.

- SS-Standartenführer Leon Degrelle (1906-1994), was awarded the German Cross in Gold on 9 October 1944 after having received the Knight's Cross and the Oakleaves to the Knight's Cross, while commanding the 28th SS Volunteer Grenadier Division "Wallonien". Degrelle was of course one of the most remarkable personalities of the 20th Century: a political leader who literally put his life on the line for his beliefs. It should be noted that all of his military awards and promotions were deserved and documented and not given due to any "favoritism". He was quite a contrast to most of our present day U.S. political "leaders" who while quite willing to wage bloody, aggressive wars with other people's lives, managed to avoid military service as much as possible themselves! Condemned to death in Belgium after the war, Degrelle just barely made it to Spain (crash landing just over the border in a plane intended for the Norwegian Leader Vidkun Quisling who let him use it), where he obtained political asylum and lived the remainder of his life as a prolific author, historian and commentator. He was one of inspirations for publishing Siegrunen to begin with!

There were of course many, many other highly honored European volunteers that served in the Waffen-SS and as a good introduction to them I strongly recommend the book: Europas Freiwillige der Waffen- SS by Patrick Agte (Munin Verlag: 2000), which is packed with rare photos, documents and information on volunteers of 11 different nationalities. While I don't believe it is totally complete (the highly decorated Swiss volunteer SS-Ustuf. Peter Renold is omitted for instance), but it certainly excellent as far as it goes!