

## *Observations on the 33rd SS Division "Charlemagne"*

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**This article is based on a written interview with Oberstrumbannführer E. Raybaud, former commander of SS Grenadier Regiment 58 as given to Jean-Louis Roba. Some further modifications have been made by the editor.**



Raybaud was a high-ranking officer and leader of the "Milice" in the Limoges area of southern France during the German occupation. In that capacity, he led the fight against the local 'resistance' forces, whose best fighters were the communists under their leader, *Guingouin*. Partially due to the Mediterranean temperament of the people who lived in that area, the battles with the 'resistance' were particularly bloodthirsty ones. Atrocities were committed by both sides and captives were sometimes tortured or burned to death.

Raybaud disapproved of all such actions and he only wanted to maintain order. As an old soldier who had fought in the May 1940 campaign against the Germans, he was not particularly politically oriented. But following the Allied landings in 1944 (Operation "Overlord" and "Anvil"), disorder began to grow as previously quiescent civilians made an effort to get into the camp of the victors. This resulted in uncontrolled attacks against the German and Vichy forces and brought about tragic reprisals such as at Tulle and Oradour.

In his article published in "Siegrunen" #12 (i.e. "French Volunteers of the Third Reich"), Mr. Lewis described the Milice as a sort of "Black and Tans." This was not a totally correct observation. When the Vichy government began to rule the un-occupied zone of France, it had to raise a special police force for security purposes. This "Milice" as it was called was placed under the command of Joseph Darnand, an ex-soldier and hero of the 1940 war against the Germans. Darnand was loyal to Marshall Petain and he tried to maintain order and defend the legitimacy of the Vichy government. Quite a few men enlisted in the special "Milice" forces; some of them proved to be rather undesirable people but it was the same for the "other side" — this was not uncommon in a "civil war" of this nature.

Today, for a variety of reasons, the name "Milice" is in ill repute in France. Its men suffered the same fate as all losers do in a civil war, as the soldiers were held responsible for leaders who were either dead or missing. [Editor's note: At the very least 100,000 people were put to death in 'liberated' France and among them were quite a few of the "Milicians"]. Before discussing the operations of the French Waffen-SS, it is important to note some of the political problems that existed in France. The 'collaborators' were, like the men of the 'resistance,' divided in their beliefs and

loyalties. While the “underground” was divided into communist and non-communist segments with even further sub-divisions, the forces of the Vichy regime also had its partitions. Some soldiers wanted to stay in France and fight the partisans while others preferred to go to the Eastern Front to fight the Bolsheviks; the latter group immediately began enlisting into the L.V.F. (Légion des Volontaires Français — or French Volunteer Legion Against Bolshevism), which was established in 1941. The “Milice” members generally felt that the war in the east was one between Germany and Russia and they preferred to fight against their “internal enemies” and leave the war against the Soviet Union to the “victors of 1940.” However, for symbolic purposes, the “Milice” sent a small contingent to serve with the L.V.F.

In 1943, young Frenchmen were given the opportunity to enlist into the Waffen-SS and this became the third French “force” to fight on the side of the Germans. While the “Milice” was not dependent on the Wehrmacht, it was sometimes sub-ordinated to it, for instance during the fighting against the partisans at “Les Gliers.” After the Allied sweep into France, the men of the “Milice” were forced to flee France for Germany where they had to be incorporated into the Germany Army. They had initially hoped to keep their identity intact by serving in a pure “Milice” unit, but this proved to be impossible and they found themselves sent to the Wildflecken troop training grounds to be incorporated into the SS Division “Charlemagne” along with survivors from the L.V.F. and the 7th SS Storm- brigade “Frankreich.”

Due to high levels of political antagonism it proved impossible to form units from the L.V.F., “Milice” and French SS within one SS Division. These soldiers were too devoted to their individual leaders, such as the “Milice’s” Darnand and the L.V.F.’s Doriot. It was therefore deemed necessary to split up the “Milice” personnel between the various French SS units.

With some regrets, the “Milice” officers accepted that decision and a “Milice” officer named Vaugelas was made chief-of-staff of the division under its new commander Oberführer Paud, who had been in command of the L.V.F.

E. Raybaud joined the division with the rank of Sturmbannführer (Major). Because of some early clashes between the soldiers, Raybaud used his authority to have political expressions banned in the barracks. Unfortunately he was not upheld by other officers at the time and some more outbreaks of fighting between different French factions transpired, (the ex-L.V.F. officers had not supported Raybaud’s political ban). Eventually Raybaud’s original judgment was supported by most of the officers in the division.

Towards the end of 1944, while still at the Wildflecken camp, the men of the “Charlemagne” Division were inspected by Darnand, the former L.V.F. political leader who had been appointed general inspector of French Forces in Germany. Darnand

wanted the place of honor at the parade of the troops, but this was given over to the commander of the 28th SS Division "Wallonien," Leon Degrelle, who was also present at Wildflecken at that time. Darnand was given a poor reception by Oberführer Puaud and by the German inspector of the "Charlemagne" Division, Brigadeführer Krukenberg, and he left angrily the next day. On the other hand, Degrelle was better received, and after looking over some of the ex-"Milicians," made the comment that: "Such a unit would find a place in my Stormbrigade!" [Editor's note: Degrelle, impressed by the "Charlemagne" Division gave a short speech and apparently convinced one full barracks of French volunteers to come over to his division! The time of this parade seems to have been in November 1944 ].

At the beginning of December 1944, for an unknown reason, the commander of the 2nd French Regiment (now 58th SS), Stubaf. Bridoux, left the unit. After meeting with his father, he decided to join a "pure" SS battalion from the 1st French Regiment (now 57th SS). [Editor's note: At this time the 57th SS Regiment was developing into an ideologically "pure" SS unit while the 58th SS Regiment retained more of a French orientation]. Stubaf. Raybaud now became the new commander of the 58th SS Regiment. But he found the composition of the regiment to be about 15% ex-"Milice" and 80% former L.V.F. To avoid all incidents, he held a meeting with his officers and later assembled all of his men to ask them to moderate their passions and become united to improve the battle-worthiness of the regiment. Raybaud's advice was listened to and afterwards all went well. There was only one incident. A young officer who was a member of the P.P.F. (Parti Populaire Français; a French "populist" movement) led by Doriot, continued to agitate the men who came from the L.V.F. Stubaf. Raybaud asked for and obtained his transfer to the division staff. The commander of the 58th SS Regiment also had good contacts with the divisional chaplain, Monseigneur Mayol de Lupe, who had been the chaplain with the L.V.F., and his influence over former members of that formation helped to keep things going well.

A few weeks after assuming command, Raybaud discovered that a German officer had established a network of political control in his regiment. This officer, who was close to Brigfhr. Krukenberg, had many contacts with different French volunteers who kept him informed about the political thoughts of their comrades. Stubaf. Raybaud took the matter to Krukenberg, who actually knew nothing about it and who was happy to cooperate to bring this activity to an end. Even though the political antagonism disappeared, the men still had to be trained to be sent to the front.

## **Training Problems**

Only the best men who volunteered were chosen to enlist into the Waffen-SS so naturally not all of the "Milicians" were sent to Wildflecken. Some of them had deserted in France, while others joined various National Socialist "police" units in

Germany. For the Waffen-SS, the Germans chose the Frenchmen who either had military experience (as had Raybaud, as a former officer of the French Army), or were otherwise fit enough for battle conditions. Those that didn't measure up or were considered untrustworthy were mostly sent to work in factories.

While the "Milicians" had seen action before, most of them were only experienced in the war against the partisans. Since this was a guerrilla war, the men of the "Milice" were unfamiliar with the demands of a mechanized war and of the material that was required for such a modern conflict. They had to all be retrained, and Wildflecken was really only suitable for a training program in spring and summer. During the winter the snow-covered everything and the main training grounds could not be used. So the "Charlemagne" training period was a very boring one compounded by insufficient equipment, [Editor's note: Drill and callisthenics were the primary activities during this time]. The men grew tired of these "stupid exercises" and feeling deceived, some of them left to join other SS units (German or Walloon), which were being sent more quickly to the Eastern Front.

Stubaf. Raybaud noticed that the ex-L.V.F. officers who had fought in the East from nearly the beginning, were suffering from a great fatigue. A serious crisis occurred when the men were required to take a loyalty oath to the Führer. The ex-L.V.F. men did not understand why, after having fought for so many months in German uniform, that they were required now to swear their fidelity. And the "Milicians," who wanted to retain their French identity above all else, simply refused to take the oath. Many soldiers did however agree to an oath that stressed only military operations for the duration of the war, but this was later altered and continued to cause misgivings among some of the French volunteers. [Editor's note: Remember that in "those days" an oath was still a sacred undertaking! Today, in our "enlightened" modern society, hardly anyone takes them seriously ].

With the exception of the oath-taking episode, morale in the "Charlemagne" Division was high. While the political differences had not all vanished, the officers believed that frontline action would help to dissolve any "dangerous thoughts." As in all active units, Stubaf. Raybaud noticed that his regiment consisted only of about 25% to 30% really good soldiers. The other men would be improved by the training program and later on at the front. The men of the 58th SS Regiment disapproved of the attitude of the soldiers of the 57th SS Regiment, which was considered the "pure SS" regiment. These French volunteers were really pro-German and seemed, at least to the men of the 58th SS Regiment, to have contempt for their homeland. Even Brighfhr. Krukenberg remarked: "Here there are young Frenchmen who are more SS than the SS themselves!" But to Stubaf. Raybaud, there was no problem. The young SS men of the 57th Regiment, did not really want to become Germans, but they had such an attitude because they wanted to be independent and considered themselves without a homeland. [Editor's note: This was due in particular to the actions one would suppose,



of the French 'government' and some of the French citizenry in the previous months]. Raybaud knew that they could not disavow their origins.



**French SS bugler (previously unpublished). Provided courtesy of Bill**

Oberführer Paud went to Berlin to meet with Reichsführer-SS Himmler to discuss the deployment of the "Charlemagne" Division. Himmler gave him assurances that the French volunteers would be sent to a front where they would not come against their fellow Frenchmen. He also promised that the men of the "Charlemagne" could fight under the French flag and could continue to practice their religion. Other promises were made concerning the future sovereignty of French territory.

### **To the Pomeranian Front**

At the beginning of February 1945, the "Charlemagne" Division left Wildflecken for the Eastern Front. 10 to 12 trains were needed to transport the entire French SS formation. Stubaf. Raybaud had some arguments with the quartermaster who failed

to issue enough equipment to his men. Some of the soldiers were forced to go to the front without having even received a steel helmet. SS Regiment 58 was given some Italian camouflage jackets, but these were inadequate for the cold of winter. Stubaf. Raybaud's HQ staff received three automobiles but only one of them was functioning.

One of the two trains assigned to 58th SS Regiment was bombed en route to Pomerania and suffered some losses, but many of the other divisional trains were strafed by Russian planes and in some of them the losses were quite high! On the way to the front, Stubaf. Raybaud was forced to punish some of his officers and men who had shown disrespect for military discipline. The training period had been too short and some of the men lacked proper military habits. Many of the men from the "Milice" who had fought the 'Resistance' had adopted the ways of their enemies so that they still behaved like they were in a partisan unit.

The French SS men did not travel with a lot of equipment since they were supposed to pick up their supplies, heavy weapons and vehicles at a military depot in Hammerstein. It was the German habit to set up such depots close to the frontlines and equip new units as they arrived. This technique would prove catastrophic for the "Charlemagne" Division.

When the decision had been made to send the Frenchmen to the Hammerstein camp for equipping, the front had still been solid. But just as the "Charlemagne" trains reached the stations near Hammerstein, the Russians launched a major offensive. So the new soldiers, poorly armed though they were, had to be rushed into action against a far superior Soviet force. In its first frontline combat assignment, "Charlemagne" Division found itself facing some 4 Red infantry division and 2 tank brigades!

57th SS Regiment had no heavy weapons or radio equipment; the divisional reconnaissance unit was supplied only with bicycles and had no motorcycles; and "Charlemagne's" artillery detachment was still in Bohemia-Moravia and it was impossible to bring it rapidly up to the front. Later on, Stubaf. Raybaud compared this time to his experience in France in June 1940. Then, as an officer in the 40th "Division de Chasseurs," he had fought under the same conditions on the Somme. Then they had opposed the German divisions without artillery, tanks or airplanes. But in 1940 there was no snow and the French soldiers fought and died on their own ground. Now in Pomerania, in a land of foreigners, they had to fight in winter against other foreigners.

In their first action, French SS men went after Red Army tanks with Panzerfaust. In a violent battle the brave French soldiers managed to destroy about 50 enemy tanks in close combat. This was impressive enough to earn a special mention for the "Charlemagne" Division in the official communique of the 2nd German Army. Afterwards a rumour circulated that the German High Command had deliberately sent the French formation to an exposed spot to see it destroyed for political reasons.

This was a falsehood; indeed Brigadeführer Krukenberg and the High Command had a very favourable attitude towards the Frenchmen. It was only fate and the unfortunate German technique of assembling fighting units so near to the frontlines, that were to blame.

### **Battles in Baerenwald and Baerenhuetten**

On the morning of 24 February 1945, the French volunteers heard that the frontlines held by Latvian SS men (from 15th Latvian SS Division) to the east of Hammerstein had been blown away by the attack of 3 Russian divisions. Stubaf. Raybaud's men disembarked from their trains in the village of Baerenhuetten. The first group consisted of the regimental staff, the I. Battalion and a company of infantry guns (light artillery).

As night fell, at 1700 hours, the little unit faced to the east. At that moment, II Battalion/Regiment 58 came up and relieved I. /58 which was sent to the village of Baerenwald to reinforce the 57th SS Regiment.

At 0400 hours on 25 February, Stubaf. Raybaud woke up to the sound of violent fighting about 3 kilometers to the east. He received orders from "Charlemagne" staff to detach his 6th Company and send it to the north of Baerenhuetten to block off a possible route of advance for the Russians. Raybaud was opposed to the order since it had little chance for success and only further depleted the strength of the weak French forces. No one could find any maps of the area at the regimental staff, so Raybaud sketched out a map himself and gave it to 6th Company's commander, Ostuf. "S.M." Not only were the French volunteers underequipped, but the men of the regimental staff were so incompetent that even this menial task fell to the regimental commander! Ostuf. "S.M." and his men started off on the suicide mission and just after leaving lost all radio contact with the regiment due to poor radio liaison work.

Soon after, Stubaf. Raybaud went to Baerenwald to contact the commander of the 57th SS Regiment, Hauptsturmführer de Bourmont. He found him 500 meters west of the village. His men were in close combat with the Russians and they fought well but they had lost contact with I./58, under the command of Hstuf. Monneuse, which had come up the day before. After Baerenwald fell to the Russians, the 57th SS Regiment retreated to join the men of the 58th SS Regiment near Baerenhuetten. The Russians were not in any hurry to attack the village; they preferred to try and encircle it.

At 2200 hours, the French SS men received the orders to retreat. As there was no motorized transport, all of the ammunition caches had to be destroyed. Each man received a Panzerfaust. The infantry guns which could not be towed were destroyed. The "march column" (consisting of men on foot and horses) withdrew, making a lot

of noise but the Russians did not attack them. The losses were so high on their side that they possibly believed the French SS to be better equipped than they really were.

At around 1200 hours on 26 February, the men of “Charlemagne” arrived in Neustettin. For the last time in the Pomerania campaign they received supplies, but their German quartermaster had already gone on to Kolberg! About three-quarters of the division’s survivors spent the night together in one large barracks. This was somewhat dangerous if the enemy attacked, but fortunately all remained quiet.

### **To Koerlin**

At 0800 hours on 27 February, “Charlemagne” was ordered to Belgard. In the course of the troop movements the Russians drew nearer to Neustettin and they slowly cut the road between that city and Belgard, but only the French SS rear-guard saw any fighting with the enemy. There was only one serious incident: at the village of Baerwalde, the column was strafed and lightly bombed by the Russian planes. The losses were high! If the Soviet troops had decided to attack the harassed men, they could cut them to pieces. During the night, a “rest” period was given to the French SS men. The men were allowed to stop for one hour! But it was in a cold wind under a snowy rain. On 28 February, at about 1200 hours, the tired soldiers were finally allowed to stop in a wooded area to the south of Belgard.

Nevertheless, Brigfhr. Krukenberg gave Stubaf. Raybaud the order to build a “March Regiment” (ad hoc regiment) from his 58th SS Regiment and the remnants of the 57th SS Regiment. The job had to be done in 3 hours! The Sturmbannführer remarked that such a job in peacetime or elsewhere (not on the frontlines) required around 2 days. After registering his objection with Krukenberg, Raybaud was given a delay of 10 hours.

Quickly, Stubaf. Raybaud organized his new unit; by the end of the day, 3 new battalions had been formed:

- I. Battalion under the command of Ostuf. Fernet from the 57th SS Regiment.
- II. Battalion under the command of Hstuf. Bassompierre from the division staff.
- III. Battalion under Hstuf. de Bourmont, consisting of elements that were of dubious fighting value; survivors from badly depleted infantry companies, etc.

The men themselves were too weary to be of much help during the reformation process. During the night, “Charlemagne” moved on to Koerlin. The French SS men were given the job of protecting the vital road linking Koerlin to Stettin. Stubaf. Raybaud was appointed “battle commandant” of Koerlin. The units of the “March



Regiment” were met on arrival and directed to the right positions. [Editor’s note: The defences of Koerlin had been laid out somewhat in advance by Standartenführer Zimmerman, an engineering officer on the “Charlemagne” staff, and an ad hoc construction battalion consisting of French volunteers from dispersed units].

Because of the proximity of the Persante River, the city of Koerlin was planned to be a natural strongpoint — a fortress which could momentarily stop the enemy drive. The “March Regiment’s” staff came into the town with the rear-guard. The new “battle commandant” was disturbed by the apathy of his officers and to improve their functioning, he decided to dismiss his chief-of-staff and replace him with Hstuf. de Perricot, a veteran of the 1st World War. Some other soldiers and a German company joined the Frenchmen to help reinforce the defences of Koerlin. Communications were very bad because the telephone lines were often cut by saboteurs (i.e. Russian infiltrators).

At 1300 hours on 3 March 1945, the first Russian combat units were sighted. The bridges across the river were mined and the German engineers who wanted to evacuate the area, decided to blow them. Upon hearing that, the “battle commandant” went out to prevent them from doing so; chiefly because a French company was still on the other side of the Persante. It was at this moment that an enemy force appeared and opened fire and Stubaf. Raybaud was badly wounded in the leg. He was quickly evacuated to the rear in an ambulance and Hstuf. de Perricot took command.

Koerlin was eventually encircled by the enemy, and the French SS were forced to breakout in small groups. Only one such group made it to the safety of the German Baltic ports. The main body of the “Charlemagne” led by Oberführer Paud tried to escape to safety under the cover of fog but was caught in a bloody ambush when the fog suddenly lifted. Paud and many of his men were killed. Another battalion, led by Hstuf. Basompierre, spent several days wandering through the thick forests before being forced to surrender.

Ostubaf. Raybaud later had his leg amputated. After the war he was tried for being an ex-member of the “Milice.” He was nearly assassinated in prison but escaped death to be released some years later. He lives today in southern France where he was often visited by Brigadeführer Krukenberg, who held him in very high regard. Krukenberg died in 1980 at the age of 90.

After Koerlin, the survivors of “Charlemagne” were sent to the north of Berlin to be reorganized. When Krukenberg was called to Berlin to take command of the 11th SS Division “Nordland,” he asked for volunteers from the French SS to join him in the last battle for the German capital. Krukenberg noted that about 90 of them decided to join him, although the exact number of French volunteers who took part in the Battle of Berlin is still not known. Hstuf. Fernet who commanded the French SS in Berlin,

reported in his memoirs that he had 4 companies of about 80 men each at his command or around 320 in total. But to Krukenberg the exact number was not important, as he remarked after the war: "90 or 300 men were the same. It was a symbol and it is senseless to evaluate a symbol." Fernet, the commander of the French SS in Berlin was one of the "pure SS" and he was recommended for the Knight's Cross decoration, but like another French volunteer and many Germans, the documentation for the reward either never survived the war or has yet to be found.

E. Raybaud only learned in 1970 that after Koerlin he had been promoted to Oberstrumbannführer and decorated with the Iron Cross, 1st Class. Given the chaos in Pomerania the news had never gotten through at the time!

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**"Charlemagne" Division shield.**