

SS Volunteer Legion "Niederlande"

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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After the German declaration of war on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, the Reich Commissioner for the Occupied Netherlands, Dr. Arthur Seyss-Inquart, addressed the Dutch nation and called for the creation of a national legion to join the Germans in the struggle against communism. The former chief of the Dutch Army general staff, Lt. General H.A. Seyffardt, offered his services and was instrumental in helping gain recruits for the new formation. He was appointed honorary commander of the Dutch SS Legion, a position which he held until his death.

While most of the first Legion volunteers came from the ranks of the Dutch National Socialist Movement (N.S.B.) led by Anton Mussert, a great effort was made to attract former Dutch Army members by offering to restore old ranks and waiving the age limit for ex-officers. Enlistment standards were not too rigid, but a recruit had to be at least 5 feet 4 inches tall and between the ages of 17 and 40 with no criminal record. A large number of potential recruits were turned down for health or political reasons, and eventually a number of individuals who had slipped into the Legion by concealing criminal records had to be discharged. The same applied to 266 former Dutch Army members who proved to be politically unreliable.

On 27 July 1941, the first large group of Legion volunteers assembled in Den Bosch, Holland and later left from The Hague railroad station for the trip to the SS training facility at Debica, near Krakau, Poland. Led by Hauptmann Vorwinden, they arrived at Krakau on 30 July.

Prior to the outbreak of the German-Soviet war, a large number of Dutchmen had enlisted in the 6th SS Standarte "Nordwest," which was composed of Dutch, Flemish and Danish volunteers. It was decided to form the Dutch Legion within the structure of Regiment "Nordwest," so to help with that process a Legion battalion was created on 26 July 1941 from Dutch soldiers already serving with "Nordwest." Effective 1 August 1941, the Legion "Niederlande" existed as a regiment with two battalions, but until September it still remained a part of Regiment "Nordwest." In the fall months, a vigorous training program was carried out, mostly at the troop training grounds at Ayrs in East Prussia. With the dissolution of SS Regiment "Nordwest" in late September 1941, the Legion "Niederlande" became a fully independent entity. In October a third battalion was added, called the "W.A." Battalion, because it was

recruited primarily from the W.A. stormtrooper arm of the N.S.B. General Seyffardt a member of the N.S.B. since 1934, presented the colors to this unit, which was slated to become the I. Battalion of the 2nd Legion Regiment. However, it later proved impossible to form a second regiment so the battalion was retitled III./SS Legion "Niederlande."

In mid-January 1942, the combat ready Legion, consisting of 2 600 troops, was transported by rail to Danzig and from there was shipped across the Baltic Sea to Libau on the Latvian coast. The Dutch Legion then marched by foot to Riga where it joined a truck convoy that took it to Pleaskau. From there the Legion went to its assigned battle area on the Volkhov Front, in the vicinity of Gusi-Gora to the north of Lake Ilmen. The situation was critical; the Soviets had launched massive attacks all along the Eastern Front using forces from Asia that had been freed for use due to an espionage coup by Victor Serge, a Communist agent who forwarded information of the Japanese plans that they were not contemplating an attack against the Soviet Union, but that they would attack south against the British and American forces. Everywhere there were holes in the front that had to be plugged and by the end of January 1942, the Legion "Niederlande" was fully engaged in hard combat.

By March 1942, the Legion had won its first mention in the Wehrmacht War Bulletin, and it had proven itself to be a first-rate field formation. In April 1942, after having been reduced from 3 battalions to barely 2 companies in size, the Legion "Niederlande" was withdrawn from the front for refitting. Due to the extreme losses, Dutch N.S.B. leader Mussert began ordering members of his W.A. paramilitary organization to sign on with the Legion. At any rate, by June "Niederlande" was back up to strength. On 15 June 1942, it returned to action and participated with great success in the final push against the trapped Soviet divisions in the "Volkhov Pocket."

During the first months of Legion "Niederlande's" frontline deployment an interesting – but tragic – little story unfolded. Back in Holland, Mussert's N.S.B. had won the backing of the Germans and for some other Dutch nationalist/NS leaders that was not particularly good news. One of Mussert's rivals was an early Dutch Fascist named Sinclair de Rochement, who had founded an organization called the National Solidarity Group. For some unknown reason the Gestapo became interested in him and after learning of this, de Rochement joined the Dutch SS Legion under a concealed identity, (he was at least 40 years old at the time). On 13 March 1942, de Rochement was mortally wounded while on a scout-troop operation between the lines near Gusi. While he was dying he revealed his identity and made one last request: that the Gestapo bureau in The Hague be told that he had fallen in the fight against Bolshevism! According to some writers, de Rochemont had deliberately sought death in action, so he may have been suffering from a guilty conscience.



Dutch SS Rottenführer is presented the Iron Cross, 2nd Class at an awards ceremony, photo courtesy of Kenneth Nieman.



German SS officer presenting a Dutch volunteer with the Iron Cross, 2nd Class. Photo courtesy of Kenneth Nieman.



Photo of an original Legion collarpatch.

In early July 1942, the Dutch infantry-gun (light artillery) company was sent to support the 250th Infantry Division "Spanish Blue" on the Leningrad Front. Towards the end of July, the entire Legion moved into positions around Krasnoje-Selo in the Leningrad sector and for the next several months participated in the hard static warfare that took place in that area. The fighting on the Leningrad Front was often very intense and the Legion lost 42 men killed on 4 December 1942 alone.

In January 1943, the 14th Anti-tank Company of the Legion was placed in frontline positions to the west of Schluesselburg and participated in extremely violent fighting. In February, a member of this company, SS-Schütze Geradus Mooyiman, destroyed 13 tanks in a single day. For this feat he became the first Germanic SS volunteer to receive the Knight's Cross, which was bestowed to him on 8 March 1943 by the commander of the 2nd SS Brigade (to which the Legion had been subordinated), SS-Brigadeführer von Scholz.



Legion "Niederlande" funeral party honor guard.

Back in the Netherlands, Lt. General Seyffardt and his special staff worked tirelessly on behalf of the Legion. Then on 6 February 1943, Seyffardt was murdered at his home by terrorists posing as postmen. They had used British-provided "Sten guns" to carry out their foul deed. A large crowd turned out for Seyffardt's state funeral and on 9 February, Adolf Hitler bestowed his name on the 1st Company of the Legion "Niederlande" as a special honor. The name "General Seyffardt" was embroidered in silver on a black cuffband for the company and the title and insignia were later passed on to the 48th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment of the heroic 23rd SS Division "Nederland."

On 27 April 1943, Legion "Niederlande" was withdrawn from the Eastern Front. On this occasion, the commander of the 2nd SS Brigade, Brigfhr. Fritz von Scholz, issued the following "Order-of-the-Day":

"Since 1 February 1942, the Legion has, in conjunction with the Volunteer Legion 'Flandern' and with volunteers from Norway before Leningrad, defended against or destroyed the Bolshevik enemy. Your men have bravely proven themselves in the test of the hard fighting on the Volkhov and before Leningrad. Looking back, the courage of the Legion has brought about success in all of your actions on the Eastern Front! Your fighting spirit is unbroken! The numerous decorations are the best expression of your courageous struggle.

"Future generations will remember all those among you who gave their lives in this battle for a new Europe, and your achievements in leading the fight for the ultimate victory!"

In early May 1943, the Legion "Niederlande" reached the SS training camp at Grafenwoehr in Bavaria, where it was dissolved on 20 May. About 2 500 of its soldiers decided to continue serving with the new 4th SS Brigade "Nederland." During its short span of existence, the SS Volunteer Legion "Niederlande" had gained an awesome reputation for its terrific frontline exploits. It is to be hoped that someday the full, detailed history of this Legion can be published.

Legion "Niederlande" Order-of-Battle (Fall 1941): Field Post Number

Legion Staff with Staff Company	40 112
I. Battalion with 1st to 4th Companies	40 899
II. Battalion with 5th to 8th Companies	41 450
III. Battalion with 9th to 12th Companies	42 278
13th Company (Infantry Guns–Lt. Artillery)	43 156
14th Company (Anti-tank)	43 990

Commanders:

SS-Oberführer Otto Reich, July 1941 to early 1942.

SS-Obersturmbannführer Arved Theuremann, early to mid- 1942, (temporary).

SS-Obersturmbannführer (promoted to Standartenführer) Josef Vitzthum, mid-July 1942 to May 1943, (permanent commander).

Insignia:

Collarpatch: Vertical Dutch-made and horizontal German-made "Wold's Hook" right patch with SS ranks on the left patch.

Armshield: Dutch national colors, red-white-blue on either a flag shaped or shield shaped patch worn under the German eagle on the left shield. Some patches carrying the N.S.B. colors of orange-white-blue, may also have been worn.

Helmet insignia: The SS runes and possibly sometimes the Dutch or N.S.B. colors were worn in decals on the steel helmets. When these colors were not worn, the standard SS-swastika shield was in place.

Cuffbands: A sleeve title bearing the words "Frw. (Freiwilligen) Legion Niederlande" in silver on black was issued to the troops. These came in a crude Dutch pattern and a more polished German version. 1st Company of the Legion was issued the "General Seyffardt" sleeve title and wore it in place of the "Niederlande" cuffband.

Legion Strength as of 31 December 1942:

57 officers, 1,698 men. Total: 1,755.

Those wishing to read more about Legion "Niederlande" are referred to the superb pictorial work, *Hitler's Germanic Legions* by Buss and Molo and the article "Das war 'het Legioen'! (The Actions of Dutch Volunteers in the Struggle Against Bolshevism)" by Peter Strassner, that appeared in the 1966 edition of the *Deutsches Soldaten Jahrbuch*.

R.L.

Two final notes on Legion "Niederlande" insignia usage:

- 1) The SS Runic collarpatch was widely worn and
- 2) Quite frequently no decals at all appeared on the helmet.



Members of the Legion being decorated with the Iron Cross. The Legionnaire on the right is a war reporter, and wears the rare vertical Dutch flag armshield. Photo courtesy of Kenneth Nieman.