

Úvodní přednáška namísto editorialeu/Key Note Instead Editorial

The Belgian resistance and the liberation of Pilsen/Belgický odboj a osvobození Plzně

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During the Second World War, the direct Belgian military involvement was not as substantial as that of some other European countries. But still, at the end of the war, Belgian units participated at the Battle of the Bulge, the crossing of the Rhine at the Remagen Bridgehead and one particular unit even went as far east as the Czechoslovakian town of Pilsen. This fact is now all but forgotten, even in Belgium. How is it possible that Belgian resistance fighters of the Secret Army from the area of Liège ended up more than 700 km from home at the end of the war? I would like to explain this in the next half hour.

Belgian Participation in the Second World War

After the disastrous campaign of May 1940, of the 625,000 Belgian military personnel 225,000 ended up in German POW camps and the rest, most of them conscripts, were sent home. In an effort to undermine the Belgian unity, most of the Flemish soldiers were sent home in the next year and only 80,000 Walloon military and Flemish professional officers remained in captivity.

The construction of a new, small Belgian army took a long time. In the meantime, Belgium participated in the allied war effort in other ways. Some 600 Belgian pilots fought in the Royal Air Force and almost 5000 naval personnel served in the merchant navy and the Royal Navy and there was also a Belgian Commando Troop (nr. 4; 92 men) and an SAS Squadron (210 men). Already in October 1940, a small independent Belgian unit was erected in the UK, but this *First Belgian*

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Independent Group (2200 men) had to wait until August 1944 to be deployed for the first time in Normandy. Until then, they had to content themselves with training with British units and their Dutch, French, Polish and Czech colleagues. This, by now over trained Brigade, led by lieutenant-colonel Jean Baptiste Piron, participated in the liberation of Belgium. The Flemish part of Belgium was largely liberated by the Montgomery's 21st Army Group, while the majority of Wallonia was liberated by Bradley's 12th US Army Group. It's worth mentioning that, until the liberation, about 8,000 Belgians fought on the allied side, whereas about 20,000 countrymen served in the German army, mostly on the Eastern front.

During most of that period, the Belgian government also supported the Allied war effort in other ways. The government saved most of the gold reserves of the central bank and in addition, they had a huge area to control and because of the troop movements, that area shifted all the time. Also the large number of by-passed German soldiers, some in uniform, many in civilian clothes and many armed, the large number of displaced persons and the many important enemy installations which were overrun and captured and had to be safeguarded, added to the challenges of the unit. With practically all Corps units moving forward so fast, the overrun enemy installations had to be protected not only from enemy action, but even more so against aggressive looting from civilians, displaced persons and even own troops. The amount of airstrips, hospitals, fuel and ammunition dumps, supply trains, signals installations, food stores, power plants, etc. that had to be protected soon rose to almost uncontrollable levels. Because of that multitude of tasks, the units of 17th Fusilier Battalion had to perform these with very small groups, ranging from platoon level to 3 men detachments. That this was not without danger became clear on several occasions. While most of the Germans readily surrendered, some groups put up a fight. In the after action reports there are numerous accounts of small fire fights with enemy soldiers. It was due to ability and sheer luck that there were no Belgian fatalities on those occasions. During one such incident, a 3 men patrol bumped into 20 German troops who decided not to surrender. The three men not only survived the ordeal, but even succeeded in pinning the Germans down long enough for reinforcements to arrive and take them prisoner. By the end of April, the 17 Fusilier Battalion was located near Leipzig.

The 17th Fusilier Battalion in and around Czechoslovakia

On 28 April, the entire V Corps, so also the 3rd Tank Destroyer Group with its attached Belgian 17th Fusilier Battalion was transferred from the 1st US Army to general George Patton's 3rd US Army. The Corps participated in operations around and in Czechoslovakia in order to protect the northern flank of the 3rd Army's operations in southern Germany and western Austria. On 5 May, a 3 man detachment of the Belgian battalion captured the entire HQ of the 9th German Air Army, including the general, in a wood Nera Bayreuth.

On 6 May, the 1st company moved from Dorfmund to Pilzen, crossed the Czechoslovak border at 15.30 Hr, and arrived in Pilzen, while the city had not yet being fully liberated. German pockets still resisted, for example at the Skoda factories. The next day, the 5th company and the pioneer unit joined the 1st company. The city of Pilsen greeted their liberators, Americans and Belgians alike, with exuberant public celebrations after having been oppressed by the Nazis for six long years. While the official announcement of Victory-Europe Day was received on 8 May 1945, the full scale security operations continued for the remainder of the month, largely due to the already mentioned huge area to control, the large number of by-passed German soldiers, the large number of displaced persons and the many important enemy installations that were captured. In addition, some small numbers of determined and fanatic enemy soldiers did not cease their hostile actions and large numbers of German soldiers continued to cross the border from Czechoslovakia into Germany in greater numbers than the Rear Area Section actually could handle. Due to the cessation of official hostilities, it was decided that the Corps Area was to be divided between the different divisions. That would eliminate the need for a special Rear Area Security Section.

Starting 12 May, all Belgian military were gathered on the Czechoslovakian border, but in German territory, with the mission to build dams, to guard the Lines of Communication and essential installations and to take care of the prisoners of war. The next day it was decided to relieve all Belgian units on guard duty with American elements of the 9th Armored Division. By 18 May, the 17th Battalion was relieved and transported to its assembly area. On 21 May, the Battalion received the mission to occupy Kreis Wittlich, 38 km northeast of Trier and to control the traffic. It took until

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25 May for the units to be moved to their new sectors. The guard mission of food and ammunition depots, and bridges lasted until 11 July 1945, when the battalion was transferred to the 21st Army Group. On 13 July, the unit returned to Belgium to its new assembly area at Beverloo after having been relieved by the French 1st Army. On 26 July, the Battalion took over from the 30th Fusilier Battalion around Brussels. On 12 February, when the Battalion passed under command of the 10th Brigade, it relieved the 61st Fusilier Battalion in the Binche region, pending the complete dissolution on 31 March 1946.

Conclusion

The Belgian Government was able to establish, in record time, from September 1944 to May 1945, an army of over 70,000 men; divided over 62 fusilier battalions, 8 engineer and pioneer battalions and several other small units. While most were assigned to static missions, some battalions even took part in offensive operations. The unit that went the furthest, was the 17th Fusilier Battalion. After the war had ended, this Belgian battalion had covered some 2,000 km in total, it had collected some 11,000 prisoners, 34 intact fighter planes and a vast amount of military equipment. Most other battalions were stationed in Belgium or arrived only in Germany after the capitulation. While some of non-commissioned officers and men who had served in the resistance, and then mainly in the secret Army of the region of Liege. The unit's 801 men were divided into five rifle companies and one HQ company with major Simon Hazard as its commanding officer. Training went smoothly and on 4 March 1945 it was presented its ensign by the ladies of the town. Two days later the unit was deemed to have acquired the necessary operational level and it was sent off to Eupen on the Belgian-German border. When they arrived there, some men (13) were still in their civilian clothes, but they were rapidly provided with American clothes.

The 17th Fusilier Battalion's first missions

Placed under command of the American First Army (general Courtney Hodges), it was attached to V Corps' (Major-general Clarence Huebner) 3rd Tank Destroyer Group (Colonel Samuel Mays) from whom it got its first badge. It would only acquire

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its own badge after the liberation of Pilsen. This Tank destroyer group was tasked with V Corps rear area security operations, cleaning up enemy who were left behind in the wake of the front-line troops and guarding the Lines of Communication and Essentials installations. The arrival of an infantry battalion was a very welcome addition for that purpose. The 17th Fusilier Battalion was the only infantry battalion the rear area security detachment had at its disposal. Other units, mostly Field Artillery battalions, would come and go to aid them in that task. The Belgian battalion effectively participated with the 3rd Tank Destroyer Group operations from 11 March 1945 onward, when it entered Germany. It was dispersed over different sectors to facilitate their missions. As the front-line divisions moved forward, so did the rear area but the first two weeks of ether static operations proceeded in a relatively calm manner, ideal for getting the ex-resistance fighters some additional operational experience for their new job. From the 25 March, the entire battalion was assembled and 5 days later, it had crossed the Rhine in its entirety, in the wake of the combat divisions of V Corps. From then on, the only easy day really was yesterday.

The speed of the allied advance while they encircled the German Army Group B (general Walter Model) in the Ruhr pocket and the ensuing operations caused all sorts difficulties for the rear area security detachment of V Corps. On 7 April 1945 German tanks following the Eder downstream and trying to break through to the plateau of Fritzlar in a feeble counterattack moved across the sector of the 3rd Tank Destroyer Group. For twenty-four hours the communications are lost between the bulk of the Group and the units at the extreme point which included elements of the 1st and 5th company. The counterattack was completely beaten two days later. Used it to provide the British exchequer with a loan. The Belgian Congo provided the allies with much needed raw materials such as rubber, gold, copper, palm oil and cotton. The uranium for the first atom bombs also came courtesy of the Belgian colony.

Belgian resistance movements and the Secret Army

During the German occupation, the vast majority of the population (just under 8 million) opted to stay out of trouble. Only about 5% chose a side, with less than 3% entering the resistance while 2% resolutely collaborated in one way or another with

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the German occupiers. Finally, around 180.000 men and women became active members of the resistance. The missions of the resistance movements were quite diverse. From lifeline operations to get Jews or downed allied pilots to escape, to clandestine publications, intelligence work, sabotage of the German Lines of Communication and the fight against collaborators.

In total, there were about 15 different resistance groups of a considerable size operating in Belgium. Because of their ideological differences, there was an almost insurmountable disunity between them. For example, it was impossible for the communist Independence Front to enter into an alliance with the right wing Secret Army. While France had an umbrella organisation that coordinated the different resistance movements, this was not the case in Belgium which resulted in less efficiency. Of all these resistance movements, the most important one was the Secret Army, an organisation that had a lot of military or ex-military personnel in its ranks. It was also the only Belgian resistance movement to be officially recognized not only by the Belgian government in exile in London, but also by the Allied military and it therefore had a military status. The Secret Army counted about 54.300 members and had a highly structured command structure. It is noteworthy to mention that the Secret Army was actually a successor of several right wing movements that had been seriously hit by the German *Abwehr* counterintelligence operations in 1942 and the beginning of 1943. The Secret Army was reorganised and it got a new leader, colonel Jules Bastin who was succeeded in 1944 by Lieutenant general Jules Pire.

The high point of the resistance came after the allied landings in Normandy. All different groups concentrated on the disruption of the German Lines of Communication. The Secret Army alone was responsible for the destruction of 95 railway bridges, 12 ordinary bridges, 285 locomotives, 1365 train wagons, 15 locks and 17 tunnels between 8 June and the beginning of September 1944. During the same period, confrontations between resistance fighters and collaborators in the areas around Louvain and in Limburg almost amounted to a small scale civil war with assassinations of collaborators and subsequent retaliations. In September 1944, in the only coordinated resistance action of the war, some 1000 resistance fighters, commanded by Secret Army member Urbain Reniers, succeeded in securing the vital port of Antwerp and prevented the Germans from destroying essential facilities such

as locks and bridges. The resistance also proved its worth during the rest of the liberation of Belgium from 3 to 12 September 1944 in preventing German destructions and guiding allied army units. They also took 20,000 Pow's.

This success of the resistance in general and of the Secret Army in particular came at a heavy cost. In total, 5950 members of the Secret Army lost their lives during the war, which amounts to more than 10% of its total numbers. Of those, 1,100 died in combat, 350 were executed and 4500 died in the concentration camps. On 15 October, the Secret Army was demobilised, but around 7,000 men remained for military assignments like guard duty.

Belgian SHAEF units

As early as June 1943 the Belgian Government in exile in London studied the possibility of intensifying the Belgian military war effort during the liberation of the European continent.

The plan „Pierlot“, named after the prime minister, anticipated, in case of a continuation of the war in Western Europe after an allied landing on the French coast, the raising of new Belgian units outside of the already existing ones. These would be raised as the liberation of the territory progressed, provided the manpower and resources allowed it. This plan included two phases. Firstly, as soon as possible, 18 battalions would be raised to continue the war on the continent. These would consist of 6 infantry and 6 fusiliers battalions, each organized into two brigades, and another 6 battalions of pioneers as support for military engineers. During the second phase, three infantry divisions were to be established in stages. These would provide Belgium with a military apparatus that could be used on the front line in case the war would last several more years. On 17 January 1944 the six infantry battalions of the first phase, were confirmed in an official agreement between the Belgian ministry of national defence and the British War Office. The Belgian Forces in the UK would provide the framework staff and after the reconquest of the territory, the existing brigade Piron would be disbanded in order to 1945, after the Japanese surrender, the Belgian Government wished the demobilize certain units but they remained available to the

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Allied High Command until 23 June 1946. Once a LMU was no longer needed, it returned to Belgium and was usually disbanded a few weeks later. By the time that Germany surrendered, that army had provided the Allies with considerable military services by participating in the campaigns of France, Belgium, Holland, Germany and even Czechoslovakia. It also had also secured communication Lines, repaired roads, constructed bridges and transported equipment and food. Nationally, this army was involved in policing and the reorganization of the territory. Internationally, its existence affirmed the principle of Belgian sovereignty. Each Fusilier battalion included 24 officers, 34 senior NCOs, 70 NCOs and 669 junior ranks, a total of about 800 men. These battalions were composed of a Staff, a Staff company (including an anti-aircraft platoon, a platoon of pioneers and administrative platoon) and five rifle companies. The equipment was exclusively of British origin, including the standard weapons like the Lee-Enfield rifle, and Bren and Sten machine guns.

From the beginning of the training of these units, the influx of recruits was so high that in some places the recruiting officers and doctors had to accept them by appointment only. The first volunteers were called to arms in mid-October and began their instruction often in harsh conditions with insufficient food and lack of clothing and equipment. Recruits trained in civilian clothes because the British equipment had not yet arrived. Later, recruits often had only one battle-dress and worn and patched trousers. Shoes or leather for repairs was unavailable for several weeks. And all this during the bad season ... Fortunately, the enthusiasm alleviated most of these difficulties.

On 3 December, the first six battalions that were formed in October paraded in Brussels before the Prince Regent, and 10 days later, they were placed at the Allies disposal. In March 1945, 4 battalions were attached to the 21st British Army Group and 11 battalions Were transferred to the 12th US Army Group.

The 17th Fusilier Battalion

This French speaking battalion was officially raised on 15 January 1945 in Charleroi, but was located and trained at the convent of the Brothers of Mary in Péruwelz, a

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small Down in the Hainaut province, close to the French border. It was entirely composed of officers, be provided for the internal security of Belgium and these would be divided into 18 battalions, 6 brigade headquarters and 6 support groups. On 17 November 1944, the SHAEF Mission to the Belgian Government passed a new request for Belgian troops amounting to 91,000 men. Fusilier battalions, engineer units, transport units and traffic control units were to be raised, together with several other small units. This meant an increase with 50 rifle and 4 pioneer battalions for the British and 24 rifle and 1 pioneer battalions for the Americans. On 1 December 1944 a second agreement between SHAEF and the Belgian government was signed. It was agreed that those units, the so called "Liberated Manpower Units", or LMU's would be assigned to either the 21st Army Group or the 12th US Army Group. For the duration of their mission, these units could be used, both in Belgium and abroad, according to the decisions made by the High Command. Due to most military barracks being occupied by Allied troops, the Belgian government was only able to raise 6 fusilier battalions, 1 engineer battalion and a limited number of smaller units every 2 months.

The British Government would equip and instruct some of the new Belgian armed forces on the basis of the same arrangements that had already been used for the rebuilding of the Belgian Forces in Britain. In an appendix to the original treaty, the "War Office" agreed to train the 20 to 30,000 Belgians who would make up the first new Brigades, on

British soil. On 17 November, after the campaigns of Normandy, Belgium and Holland, the Brigade "Piron" was held in reserve and not dissolved. She resumed her place at the front in April 1945 and participated in the second campaign of Holland. Meanwhile, between January and June 1945, five other infantry brigades were created in Belgium. Each consisted of about 4,300 men. After an organizational phase of two weeks, the Brigades were sent to Ireland for an instruction period of six months, in accordance with the Eden-Spaak agreement. When the war ended on 8 May 1945, their training was incomplete. So they would take no part in any combat, but returned to Belgium, fully kitted out with brand new equipment.

As a result of the difficulties encountered by the Government to accommodate the tens of thousands of men and to form the staff, not all 142 units

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became operational. On 8 May 1945 the total number amounted to 71,000 men. Their mission was not limited to the guarding of the Lines of Communications. Fifteen units fought alongside the British, Americans and Canadians, sometimes even on the front line.

On 15 May 1945, the Belgian Government accepted to let these units continue to be available to the British for twelve months and to the Americans for six months, but it refused to build up new units of the same type as requested by the SHAEF. On 28 August form the nucleus of the new units. The British authorities promised to equip the two infantry brigades at Belgium's expense. A first agreement between the Belgian Government and the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces, represented in Belgium by the British Major-General George Erskine, was signed on 25 June 1944. It arranged the constitution of six rifle and six pioneer battalions, after the whole or partial liberation of Belgium. These battalions would be supervised by officers and NCOs who were to be recruited in reconquered territory. They would be primarily used for guard duty, patrolling the rear of front-line units, clearing towns and countryside, and Nazi hunting operations. The agreement between the Minister of Defence and the War Office of 17 January 1944 was never executed. Indeed, on 12 September 1944, the Allied High Comrnand predicted that the war would end before winter. Given the time necessary for their preparation, the creation of new combat units was now only of limited value. And so, on 26 September, the Belgian project was shelved. The agreement with SHAEF on the other hand remained a point of interest to the High Command. Indeed, the length of the Lines of Communication continued to be a problem. To solve it, Belgium had to rapidly establish rifle units and auxiliary Engineering units. The SHAEF mission in Belgium sparked the formation of the six fusilier battalions and six battalions of pioneers under the Agreement of 25 June. Six additional fusilier battalions would replace the six cancelled infantry battalions. The total number of these units would amount to 18,000 men. In order to constitute these units, the Belgian Government appealed exclusively to volunteers, giving priority to former resistance members. These units were supervised by professional soldiers. Immediately after the liberation of Belgium, the Belgian goverment started with the recruitment of volunteers for raising those 6 battalions.

Numbers 1 to 3 being of Dutch speaking origins and 4 to 6 of French speaking origins. They received a shortened training, and by half December 1944 they were put under operational control of the Allied High Command. The 5th and 6th Fusillier Battalions were immediately used for front duty, and even participated in the Battle of the Bulge. After the failure of Operation Market Garden, it became apparent to the High Command that Germany would resist longer than expected and by November 1944 it was clear that the 18,000 Belgian troops would not be sufficient for internal security and for guarding the Lines of Communication in Belgium. Various talks resulted in an agreement between the British and Belgian foreign secretaries Anthony Eden and Paul-Henri Spaak on 9 November 1944. The British Government were to equip three new infantry divisions for the future occupation of Germany. The 1st Division should be ready in no more than one year, the second in 18 and the third in 24 months time. In addition, 20,000 men were to these battalions participated in more glorious actions than others, all participated in the final war effort with an ideal that was recognized by the Allies.

O autorovi

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Přednáška byla pronesena na odborné konferenci Svoboda, uspořádané k 70. výročí osvobození západních Čech od nacismu. Konferenci pořádala katedra historie Fakulty pedagogické Západočeské univerzity v Plzni, za podpory Magistrátu města Plzně a Velvyslanectví Belgického království dne 5. května 2015 v aule budovy ZČU v Plzni, Jungmannova 1. / The lecture was uttered during conference „Freedom“, organized with celebration of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Western Bohemia from Nazism. The conference was organized by the Department of History, Faculty of Education, University of West Bohemia, with the support of City of Pilsen and the Embassy of Kingdom of Belgium on 5 May 2015, in auditorium room, Pilsen, Jungmannova str. No 1.