

Ukrainians' fight for France

Rather than serve as instruments of the *Waffen-SS's* brutal partisan war in eastern France, two Ukrainian battalions went over to the French Resistance.

By *Ronald B. Sorobey*

Along-forgotten battle in northeastern France gives ample credence to the cliché "truth is stranger than fiction." During the summer of 1944, in little more than 100 days, two battalions of impressed Ukrainians went from being *Waffen-SS* grenadiers to heroes of the French Resistance who would be awarded a *Legion d'Honneur* and four *Croix de Guerre*.

The two battalions had their genesis in July 1942 in the German-occupied Ukraine. The first was formed in Kremianets, Ternopil Oblast, as the 102nd Battalion; the second was created in Kiev as the 118th. Both battalions were initially recruited by the SS to serve as police auxiliary units protecting military and transportation sites from Soviet partisans. The men were a wide assortment—former prisoners of war, victims of Josef Stalin's famine-genocide who volunteered to fight the Soviets, and men from 18 to 30 who were given a choice of enlistment or forced labor. Some were even members of clandestine Ukrainian independence groups who were seeking military experience that would one day be put to use in freeing Ukraine from Russian occupation.

The two battalions completed training in October 1942, and the men were assigned guard duties in Ukraine and Belarus. By early 1943, the Ukrainian commander of the 102nd opened secret talks with the local leaders of the Ukrainian insurgent army for his unit to defect to the embryonic Ukrainian national resistance forces on December 12, 1943. Before this could take place, however, he was badly wounded in an ambush by Soviet partisans on December 6. Following staggering losses the previous year, in January 1944 the German army faced a critical manpower shortage. To partially resolve the shortages, both the 102nd and 118th were redesigned as "*Schuma*" (*Schutzmannschaft*, or self-defense) battalions and helped form *Schuma* Brigade Siegling. Both battalions were withdrawn on February 2, 1944, to Eylau in East Prussia for a further six-month training program. By that time Major Lev Hloba had become the nominal commander of the 102nd. Although he may well have been a descendant of Ivan Hloba, the last chancellor of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, the actual power rested with a *Waffen-SS* Major Hanenstein, who had been seconded to the Ukrainians.

While in Eylau, the German high command decided to take *Schuma* Brigade Siegling and other Belorussian, Cossack and Russian units to form the 30th *Waffen-SS* Grenadier Division (*Weissruthenische* No. 2) on August 1, 1944. Command of the division was given to Colonel Hans Siegling, with all remaining key command positions filled by German officers. To enforce control, elements of some German police units were added. Although the Ukrainians proved to be highly motivated and reliable soldiers, other elements of the division included criminals and individuals of dubious character. The Allied landings in Normandy had resulted in a change in German plans for their Eastern units. Also after June 6, the various resistance groups in France had reorganized as the *Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur* (FFI), operating in the German rear areas. The strategic picture was complicated further by the Allied landings on the Riviera on August 15 and the advance of Lt. Gen. Alexander M. Patch's Seventh U.S. Army northward along the Rhone Valley into central France.

By mid-August, the Allied armies had broken out of the Normandy beachhead and had destroyed or captured the bulk of the German Seventh Army in the Falaise pocket. Between August 16 and 26, Canadian, British and American forces had reached the Seine and Loire rivers, while Lt. Gen. George S.

Patton's Third Army was poised at Troyes to thrust eastward to the Rhine. Inspired by the Allied advance, the FFI began the uprising in Paris on August 19.

Meanwhile, the advance of the 14 divisions of the Seventh U.S. Army along with the seven divisions of General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny's French First Army had been nothing short of breathtaking. Bypassing the heavily defended cities of Toulon and Marseille, the lead elements of the Seventh Army had reached Grenoble by August 22. The objective was to link up with elements of Patton's Third Army near Dijon and press eastward down the Belfort Gap.

As the Germans were being pressed from the west and the south, the only remaining secure source of resupply and escape lay in the network of roads and rail lines located in the Belfort Gap. Since the days of Julius Caesar, this 15-mile-wide gap between the Vosges Mountains to the north and the Jura Mountains to the southeast was the strategic corridor connecting the Paris basin to the Rhine Valley. It also contained the headwaters of the Saone-Doubs River, which was the principal tributary of the Rhone. The Saone-Doubs Valley was the natural route that Patch's Seventh Army would follow north. The FFI also knew that the region was ideal for a guerrilla offensive. Hilly and heavily forested countryside crisscrossed with numerous streams and rivers, it provided a near perfect environment for ambushes and acts of sabotage.

The task of holding the region fell to General Friedrich Wiese and his Nineteenth Army. On the orders of his superior, General Johannes Blaskowitz, commander of Army Group G, Wiese was to begin a fighting retreat from the Riviera up the Rhone Valley. Blaskowitz hoped Wiese could form a loose cordon that would permit the remaining elements of his forces to retreat safely northeastward into the Belfort Gap.

Apart from the 11th Panzer Division, under Maj. Gen. Wend von Wietersheim, most of Wiese's combat forces were essentially improvised battle groups made up of the remnants of infantry divisions and regiments. To help bolster Wiese's army, the German high command ordered the 30th *JVaffen-SS* Division to France for antipartisan duties. As part of this move, the Ukrainians arrived in Strasbourg on August 18. Their intended mission was to hold the west entrance of the Belfort Gap and neutralize any FFI units operating in the area. The 102nd Battalion was deployed to the northern end of the gap and reached Vesoul on August 20. Its operational area was situated on a narrow plateau between the Noidans-les-Vesoul and Echenoz-la-Meline just southwest of Vesoul. Captain A. Negrebetzki and the 464 men of the 118th arrived in Besancon (the birthplace of Victor Hugo) at the southern end of the gap on August 19. The following day they were deployed to Camp Valdahon, about 20 miles southeast of Besancon.

Deployment to France placed the Ukrainians in a moral dilemma. While many were enthusiastic about engaging Soviet forces, they were far less excited about fighting in the West. They were also disinclined to take part in brutal partisan battles that could bring them into direct confrontation with French civilians. Before being deployed to their respective areas, Hloba and Negrebetzki had decided to go over to the Allies at the first opportunity.

While en route from Strasbourg to Vesoul, French Resistance fighters known as the Maquis blew up a section of the track. During the repair of the rail line, Major Hanenstein had forced the Ukrainians to participate in the backbreaking task of replacing the rails. Such demeaning labor further strengthened the Ukrainians' resolve to change sides. While the repairs were underway, the Germans seized five civilians and prepared to execute them in retaliation for the act of sabotage. Hloba personally intervened with Hanenstein and had the civilians released. His act of compassion would not go unnoticed by either the civilian population or the FFI.

The 102nd's primary objective in the region was to eliminate a 200-man FFI unit operating in the Confracourt Woods about 12 miles west of Vesoul. The Confracourt area was of particular strategic

importance. It was situated near the junction where the roads from Dijon and Besancon joined the main Paris-Basel highway. Hloba had instructed a French-speaking subordinate, a Lieutenant Wozniak, to make contact with the FFI in the region. After receiving reports of the Ukrainians' disaffection, Simon Doillon, a local FFI officer, decided to convince them to switch sides. Such an audacious venture was beyond Doillon's authority to initiate, however, and along with his friend Claude Vougnon, he approached Captain Pierre Bertin (alias Bermont), the chief of Group V, and later Commandant Paul Guepratte, the FFI departmental commander. Guepratte gave the order to proceed.

Doillon then met with Wozniak, and the two agreed that the 102nd would kill its German officers and NCOs, and go over to the FFI on the night of August 25. Before the plan could be set in motion, the Ukrainians were ordered to Dijon, but then the German district commander countermanded the order, and the 102nd returned to Fresne-St. Mames, southwest of Vesoul, for a week's rest. After detraining at Vellexon they began a route march eastward to Fresne-St. Mames.

On Hloba's orders, Wozniak left the battalion in Vellexon and proceeded to Vesoul for a rendezvous with Doillon on the morning of August 26. Upon reaching Fresne-St. Mames, Hloba joined Wozniak and Doillon. They agreed that the 102nd would come over the following day. On the morning of August 27, the 102nd's rest period was cut short, and it was ordered back to Vesoul. The route would take the Ukrainians to the southern edge of the Confracourt Woods. At 10 a.m. on the western outskirts of Noidans-le-Ferroux, Hloba fired a green flare into the sky. It was the moment to act. Hanenstein and the other 24 mounted German officers were either dragged from their horses or shot out of the saddle. The 70 German NCOs suffered a similar fate. The entire action was over in less than an hour. The Germans had been caught totally by surprise. Out of 820 men, the Ukrainians suffered only two casualties.

In the south, after trying in vain to contact the FFI, Captain Negrebetzki and his officers decided they could not wait. On the night of August 26, the 464 men of the 115th (the new designation of the 118th) surrounded German barracks at Camp Valdahon and virtually leveled them in a barrage of heavy machine gun fire. The entire German cadre of 25 officers and NCOs never knew what hit them. The Ukrainians suffered no serious casualties.

The Ukrainians' defection brought the FFI more than 1,200 trained, motivated fighting men and a staggering amount of desperately needed weapons and equipment. As they entered the Confracourt Woods, the 102nd brought with it four 45mm guns with 500 rounds, four 82mm mortars, 37 52mm mortars, 21 heavy machine guns, 120 light machine guns, 130 submachine guns, 10 automatic pistols, 700 rifles, 1,000 mortar rounds, 6,000 grenades and millions of rounds of light weapon ammunition. The battalion also had its own cavalry unit with 90 horses and a transportation section consisting of 210 wagons and 500 draft horses. The 115th's contribution, though smaller, was no less impressive. It consisted of one antitank gun, eight heavy machine guns, 25 submachine guns and four mortars as well as a huge cache of ammunition.

To distinguish themselves from their former masters, most of the Ukrainians adopted a black Basque beret. In some accounts, the Ukrainians began wearing civilian clothing mixed with army webbing and equipment. Some may have even dyed their *Waffen-SS* or *Schuma* uniforms blue.

The Ukrainians' defection occurred just as the Germans dispatched 400 pro-Nazi French *militiens* (militiamen) eastward to the Confracourt Woods to destroy 200 FFI fighters outside of Vesoul. The *militiens* were supported by 12 Mark V Panther *Aus-fuhrung* G tanks from the 11th Panzer Division. Fortunately for the FFI, the Panthers could not cross the bridge at Cubry-les-Soing, which was about three miles northwest of Noidans-le-Ferroux. That delay gave the Resistance fighters time to link up with the Ukrainians. At 6 p.m. on August 27, the 102nd entered the woods and were joined by the newly promoted

Captain Doillon and Lieutenant Claude Vougnon, who had been appointed the special liaison officers with the Ukrainians.

Later that evening two captains, Reuchet and Lesigne, advised Hloba that the 102nd had been formally inducted into the FFI as the 1st Ukrainian Battalion (*Bataillon Ukrainkn*, or BUK). The Ukrainians preferred to call themselves the Ivan Bohoun Battalion after a famous 17th-century Cossack colonel and freedom fighter. Hloba's first act was to have the FFI send a note to Negrebetzki advising him that the former 102nd had changed sides.

The local population hailed the Ukrainians as liberators. Some civilians acted as guides or provided medical care. One of the civilian guides advised Hloba that a German column was nearing the western edge of the Confracourt Woods. By noon the next day, using the training they had received from the Germans, Hloba and his men had prepared a classic "*Kopfstellung*" defensive position. Entrenched on the crest of a hill were antitank guns flanked by mortars and heavy machine guns. The preparations were unnecessary, however, as just before making contact the Germans decided to avoid the forest and detour in the direction of Vesoul.

With the immediate threat past, Doillon decided to deploy the Ukrainians northward above the highway into the Cherlieu Forest on the outskirts of Melin. After establishing its camp, the 1st BUK launched multiple attacks on the retreating Germans. On the night of August 29, a detachment assaulted and destroyed a *Luftwaffe* listening post in Sem-madon, killing eight Germans with two Ukrainians killed and four wounded. Two nights later, a second detachment ambushed a German convoy consisting of four trucks and more than 120 men. At the cost of 11 wounded, the Ukrainians captured 120 heavy caliber anti-aircraft machine guns, 100 rifles, 200 grenades, five machine pistols and 25 pistols.

These ambushes and assaults were perceived by both Wiese and Blaskowitz as serious threats to the orderly withdrawal of Army Group G. To counter the 1st BUK, Wiese began reinforcing his units in the vicinity of the Cherlieu Forest. Rather than wait to be encircled and overrun, Hloba opted to take the offensive. At about 10 a.m. on September 2, three Ukrainian platoons infiltrated through the woods to the outskirts of Melin. The village had been occupied by two squadrons from the 68th *JVaffen-SS* Cossack Cavalry Battalion. One platoon remained hidden along the main road leading into the village; the other two platoons skirted the left and right edges of Melin. The Ukrainian maneuvers created a security picket around the village that effectively covered all potential escape routes. In a lightning attack the three platoons stormed the village, catching the Cossacks flat-footed. After a brief but furious firefight, 37 surviving Cossacks surrendered. As well as capturing another substantial haul of both heavy and light weapons, the Ukrainians freed 20 French hostages who were about to be executed.

In response to the defeat at melin, the Germans subjected the Cherlieu Forest to a series of artillery barrages on September 3 and 4. Rather than wait to become cannon fodder, Hloba ordered the 1st BUK to head south toward the Confra-court Woods, which it had been ordered to hold at all cost.

In support of the push toward the Belfort Gap, Allied special forces and agents were being parachuted behind the German lines to bolster the FFI effort. A group of 82 troopers (code-named "Abel") of the 3rd French Parachute Battalion (3rd SAS) had been dropped into the area west of Belfort on August 27 and worked with FFI groups until September 12. In addition, the London headquarters of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) ordered its network of agents between Strasbourg and Dijon to do what it could to disrupt the German withdrawal.

In early September, William Casey, the senior OSS staff officer, received word that a large force of "Russians" had mutinied in eastern France and were now fighting with the FFI. Casey decided to

parachute a five-man team into the Confracourt Woods to assess the situation and provide all possible assistance. The mission, code-named "Marcel-Proust" was made up of a rather unusual assortment of individuals. The commander was Lt. Col. Waller B. Booth, who had just been booted out of Spain for being too thorough in exposing Nazi agents. Second-in-command was Lieutenant Mike Burke, a former Ail-American football star from the University of Pennsylvania. Lieutenant Walter Kuzmuk had parachuted into Normandy as a member of the 101st Airborne Division. The son of Ukrainian immigrants who settled in Boston, Kuzmuk had been seconded to the team for his knowledge of Ukrainian. Rounding out the team were two French lieutenants, Comeu and Char-mard, from die staff of General Marie Pierre Koenig, the FFI chief who had been appointed military governor of Paris by General Charles de Gaulle on August 21.

On the night of September 7, Team Marcel-Proust parachuted into the Confracourt area and by noon the next day had reached the 1st BUK's camp. Kuzmuk was an immediate hit with the Ukrainians. Many in the 1st BUK came from Kremianets, which was also the birthplace of Kuzmuk's parents. They characterized him as "an American in uniform, but in his heart and spirit, a true Ukrainian."

With Patch advancing from the southwest and on the verge of linking with Patton, Army Group G's position became increasingly precarious. To protect his retreat route, Wiese assembled a force of 4,000 infantrymen supported by a squadron of Panther tanks, artillery and SS Cossack Cavalry in Luxeuil-les-Bains, about 40 miles northeast of Confracourt, to deal with the FFI force. The German force moved westward and commenced probing attacks on the afternoon of September 8. These were followed the next day by two full-scale assaults. The Ukrainians used skills learned from the Germans to thwart die enemy force. The fighting was especially heavy during the second assault near the village of Vy-les-Rupt, but a hail of antitank, mortar and machine gun fire stopped the Germans in their tracks.

The two days of battle had cost the Ukrainians a dozen wounded, but their supply of ammunition began to run dangerously low. At that point, however, like the cavalry in a Hollywood western, the 143rd U.S. Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron of the 36di Infantry Division captured the high ground overlooking Vesoul on the morning of September 11. Instead of renewing their attack, the Germans rejoined other units evacuating toward Belfort.

Later that day the Ukrainians entered the town of Confracourt. The villagers swarmed into the streets cheering and kissing their heroes. The next day, an FFI unit arrived in Confracourt with Team Marcel-Proust. During an official ceremony, Doillon proclaimed the liberation of Confracourt and read the names of the fallen Ukrainians. At the end of Doillon's speech, the Ukrainian azure-over-golden flag was raised alongside the French tricolor.

Following the formal ceremony, Mike Burke, the Ail-American, produced a football and initiated the first American-French-Ukrainian football game. The final score was never recorded. Not to be outdone, the Ukrainians prepared pots of borscht for all participants in the game. As the festivities were winding down, the 117th U.S. Cavalry Squadron, under the command of Lt. Col. Charles J. Hodge, arrived in Confracourt. The sight of cheering French civilians toasting men in German uniforms dumbfounded Hodge, but he overcame his disbelief to continue his pursuit of the retreating 11th Panzer Division.

On September 11, de Lattre's First French Army linked up with Patton's forces near Dijon. Three days later, the first elements of de Lattre's forces reached Confracourt and with help from the 1st BUK liberated Combeaufontaine, near a critical highway junction, without firing a shot. In recognition for their heroic action in rallying their men to the Allied cause, Hloba and two of his platoon commanders were decorated with the *Croix de Guerre*.

While the members of the 1st BUK were earning laurels at the Confracourt Woods, their comrades in the 115th Battalion were involved in an odyssey of their own. After wreaking havoc at Camp Valdahon and deserting to the Allies, the 115th dispersed into three units between Adam-les-Vercel and Granges d'Epenoy to the east of Valdahon. The first unit, under the command of a Lieutenant Melechko, established its headquarters at the home of Gilbert Amiot. A member of the local Maquis, Amiot contacted a Captain Leclerc, the regional commander, and advised him of his guests. Leclerc then met with Melechko and began the process of inducting the Ukrainians into the FFI.

On August 28, the three separate elements of the 115th reformed at Bout-de-Nods just south of Valdahon, where it was redesignated the 2nd Ukrainian Battalion. Preferring a more romantic designation, the Ukrainians began referring to themselves as the Taras Shevchenko Battalion, in honor of the legendary 19th-century Ukrainian poet and patriot.

While the Ukrainians were busy integrating themselves into their new commands and the Allies were advancing, Wiese had decided to make a final determined stand at Besancon. The Nineteenth Army utilized the city's castle and other medieval fortifications to improve defenses. From August 28 to 29, American artillery pounded the three-foot-thick stone walls of Besancon, which were reinforced by six feet of compacted earth. Although the walls were not breached, the concussion of the rounds was devastating on the German defenders. The steadily growing U.S. forces outside of Besancon and the 2nd BUK and other FFI forces to the rear convinced Wiese to prematurely abandon the town on August 30.

The 2nd BUK was redeployed to an FFI camp northwest of Besancon on the outskirts of Bemont. The local FFI commander, Victor Petit, initially employed the Ukrainians in a series of minor ambushes and skirmishes. The first major test of the 2nd BUK took place on September 5. The battalion was divided into two units in order to participate simultaneously in two separate actions. One company, with the support of the 3rd *Regiment des Chasseurs Alpins*, captured the town of Pontarlier.

A more spirited engagement involved two companies of the 2nd BUK at Chaux-les-Passavant. In this action, the Ukrainians took on the lead elements of a retreating German motorized division. The two companies were victorious in the ensuing fire-fight with seven killed and five badly wounded. Among the wounded was Private Danlyo Klym, who would receive the *Legion d'Honneur* in 1963 for his heroism in that fight.

On September 7, the 2nd BUK met the forward units of the 14th *Regiment des Tirailleurs Tunisiens* near Dambelin. The Ukrainians would participate in two more battles: Les Grand Bois on September 11 and Pont-de-Roide on the 13th (the fourth *Croix de Guerre* was earned there). During the second action, they were instrumental in capturing a critical railway junction.

By the end of September, combat operations in the western end of the Belfort Gap were effectively over. With the area in Allied hands, the remnants of the German Nineteenth Army had to make a grueling retreat into the Vosges Mountains. The final push to capture Belfort and reach the western bank of the Rhine would be underway in matter of days.

With the hour of victory fast approaching, the fate of the Ukrainians was yet to be decided. During high-level negotiations among Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Stalin, it had been decided that all displaced persons would be repatriated to their home countries. Given their earlier service in the *Waffen-SS*, the future for the members of the 1st and 2nd BUK was, potentially, bleak.

The French had placed the 1st BUK in reserve at the Chateau de l'Abbye near Neuville-les-la-Charite. While the Ukrainians were there, the Seventh U.S. Army headquarters began making arrangements to

have them disarmed and repatriated to the USSR. When they got wind of that, Captains Bertin and Doillon intervened. They argued that the 1st BUK was part of the French army and outside American jurisdiction. Kuzmuk reminded his superiors that the Ukrainians would be either executed or imprisoned if they were returned to the USSR. The OSS officer added that repatriation as a preface to certain death would be a betrayal of men who had made an outstanding contribution the Allied liberation of France.

Colonel Booth supported Kuzmuk's contentions and traveled to General Patch's headquarters. During his debriefing by Colonel William Quinn, head of the Seventh Army's intelligence section, Booth constantly remarked on the heroics of the Ukrainians and their contributions to the Allied effort. Booth and Kuzmuk's passionate defense of the Ukrainians delayed the repatriation.

While the Americans were trying to sort out what they would do with their unlikely—and unexpected— allies, the French took the unorthodox step of simply enrolling the entire 1st BUK into the 13th Demi-Brigade of the French Foreign Legion, which was a part of their First Army. This was the only time in the entire storied history of the Legion that an entire foreign unit was inducted. Still dressed in black berets and German uniforms, the Ukrainians marched from Chateau de l'Abbaye on September 26 to participate in the capture of Belfort. In their last action as the 1st BUK, they assaulted and secured Hill 736 near Belfort on October 3. Following that action, the battalion was disbanded, and the Ukrainians were dispersed as individual replacements throughout the 13th Demi-Brigade.

Appalled upon learning of the mass recruitment of the 1st BUK into the Legion, Soviet authorities demanded the return of the men they considered traitors—and kept this up until December. To support their demands, the Soviets began submitting bogus documents, evidence and eyewitness accounts insinuating that the Ukrainians were war criminals. These slanderous accusations were followed by references that the men were traitors and collaborators. Lieutenant Colonel Bernard Saint-Hillier, commander of the 13th Demi-Brigade, refused every request and offered the Ukrainians the choice of repatriation to the USSR or remaining in the Legion. Most opted for the latter.

The 2nd BUK's postwar fate was a little more confused. During a burial ceremony for seven members of the 2nd BUK who had been killed in the fighting at Les Grand Bois and Pont-de-Roide, two Soviet officers arrived. They had convinced the French authorities there to have the Ukrainians disarmed and transported by train to Marseille, where they would board a ship to Odessa. With time running out, the 2nd's French liaison officers gave the men the option of enlisting in the Legion—of nearly 350 men, 230 did. The remainder returned to the USSR, where they were arrested and sentenced to 25 years of hard labor in the gulags. Many of the Ukrainians in the Foreign Legion served on with distinction in France's colonial wars in North Africa and Indochina. Although their battles against their former German masters have been forgotten by most of the world since the end of World War II, their contribution to French liberation is still remembered by the citizens of the small villages around the Belfort Gap.