

Legion des Volontaires Francais

The French Volunteer Legion LVF

Introduction

This article briefly describes the formation of the LVF and the fighting in 1941-42.

The article is a reproduction of an English-language article by Ernesto Sassot found on the Internet (Source 1).

Setup

The Legion des Volontaires Francais (LVF, The French Volunteer Legion) began recruiting personnel on 7 July 1941.

The bad attitude that the Vichy government had towards the legion meant that the recruitment went slower and gave a much smaller support than expected.

In addition, a number of volunteers were rejected because the Germans wanted the LVF to be a small unit, so as not to reduce the signal value of a defeated France in the new Europe.



The volunteers who were accepted came mainly from the right-wing parties that supported the creation of the Legion. Others were Belarusians, Georgians and Armenians from the Foreign Legion, as well as Arabs and blacks from the colonies.

Furthermore, there were quite a few veterans from the Spanish Civil War, both nationalists and republicans.

With this composite group the formation of the first of the legion's two battalions at Versailles began. The officer corps was marked by the fact that the best French officers had remained in the army, as the armistice provisions allowed the Vichy government.

In the period from 4 September to 12 October, the 1st and 2nd battalions and the support companies were transferred to training in Deba in Poland. Here they met their future commander, Colonel Roger Laborne - a seasoned veteran of the First World War with extensive experience in leading colonial troops, but at 60 years old, both too old and

unprepared for the conditions of the war on the Eastern Front.

The legion was designated *Franzosisches Vestärktes Infanterie Regiment 638* (French Reinforced Infantry Regiment 638). The term "enhanced" had no hold in reality; it was an ordinary light infantry regiment with two battalions.

The unit swore the oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler on October 5, but only in his capacity as commander in chief in the fight against communism.

The unit wore German uniforms, but it was not without some reluctance and resignation.

To the front

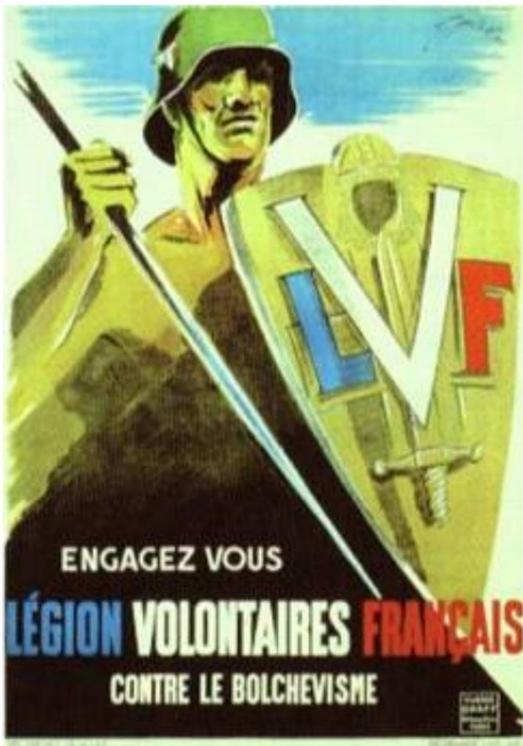
After a hasty and incomplete training, the march towards Smolensk began at the end of October 1941.

The strength was then 2,532 men.

The Legion was subordinated to the 7th German Infantry Division, which came to the front at the start of the last German attempt to reach Moscow before winter set in. It was tough conditions.

The 1st Battalion came to the front on 24 November and had its baptism of fire two days later when, together with the 19th and 61st German Infantry Regiments, it attempted to capture Djukovo as a prelude to the advance on Kubinka.

The battalion's efforts were not successful, but the worn-out German units fared no better.



The attack was resumed on 1 December with greater success and the 1st Battalion captured twelve bunkers and inflicted significant losses on the enemy. However, the battalion's own losses were also high. 12 dead and 55 injured.

The 2nd Battalion took up the position immediately to the left of the 1st Battalion immediately after the attack.

In the first week of December, the French units took part in a number of minor battles. They fought bravely, but the lack of training greatly affected the effort.

The Russian counterattack began on 5 December. The 1st battalion's positions were breached in several places and the battalion was driven so hard that it was withdrawn after only a few hours of fighting. 2nd Battalion

held out until December 8th.

In just two weeks the legion had a loss of 450 men, 150 wounded in battle and 300 frostbitten.

These casualties were far greater than those of the neighboring German units and must be due not only to a lack of experience, but also to poor management.

Reorganization

The Legion was withdrawn to Smolensk, to be part of the 403rd Security Division. On arrival on 9 January the force was down to 1,096 men - the rest had been killed, captured or deserted. In Smolensk, the force was reorganized and the battalions were, among other things, reduced to two companies.

After a short effort with security tasks in the hinterland, the legion's combat power was zero and it was withdrawn to Poland in mid-February.

During the stay in Poland, the two battalions were combined and a third was formed by new recruits from France. After removing unwanted elements from the units, the 638th Infantry Regiment was disbanded and two independent battalions were formed: I/LVF of 750 men and III/LVF of 624 men. The two battalions underwent intensive training which brought them up to German standards. The 3rd Battalion was sent to fight guerrillas in mid-May and the 1st Battalion followed in July.

The volunteer French troops did not return to the front until 1944 ¹⁾, where they fought successfully and won the honors that did not go to the original legion. In fact, the LVF was considered the worst of the eight foreign units in the Armed Forces in 1941-42.

Organization

638th Infantry Regiment

Staff company

Engineering division

Clarification sharing (cyclist)

Signal sharing

1 Battalion (I/LVF) 1st,

2nd and 3rd Light Infantry Companies 4th

Heavy Company (3 machine gun platoons (MG34) and 1 medium mortar platoon (80mm))

2 Battalion (II/LVF) 5th,

6th and 7th Light Infantry Company 8th

Heavy Company (3 machine gun platoons (MG34) and 1 medium mortar platoon (80mm))

13th infantry gun company (Six 75mm and two 150mm infantry guns)

14. Anti-tank company (12 37mm anti-tank guns)

Sources

1. <http://www.wargamesdirectory.com/>
2. http://www.ifrance.com/ANF/Marechal_PETAINE/affiches.htm
3. <http://www.feldgrau.com/>

More info

A photo of troops from the Legion with an illustration of the sleeve badge can be found at <http://axis101.bizland.com/FrenchAwards1.htm>

Kaare Myltoft

Notes:

1) In September 1944, the LVF was merged with *the Französische SS-Freiwilligen-Sturmbrigade* and became part of *the Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS Charlemagne*.