

# The Brandenburg Commandos

Germany's Warrior-Spies



Guerilla tactics were nothing new to Theodore von Hippel when he joined the Abwehr after The Great War. Having been a junior officer in General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck's army in German East Africa, he had much experience in the fields of organized mayhem. Not only had he taken part in one of the greatest guerilla campaigns in world history, but he had also made an extensive study of Colonel TE Lawrence's use of Arab cavalry in hit-and-run strikes against the Turks in Arabia. He was indeed a learned man in his field.

After his demobilization from the German colonial army, Hippel decided to try his hand at a job with the German intelligence staff. Here he introduced many radical ideas, the main one being the formation of a small, elite unit specially trained to penetrate the enemy's defences prior to major offensives. This idea gained little support amongst the traditionally-minded Prussian generals, but Hippel was not easily discouraged. When the Abwehr got word of Hippel's ideas, he was welcomed with open arms.

The German high command allowed Hippel to form a battalion of his "special soldiers" for the army, and give them the special training required for the proposed operations. These included, among other things, sabotage, capturing roadways and bridges, and securing strategic targets before they were demolished. This new unit was known as the Ebbinghaus Battalion, and first saw action in Poland, where it performed admirably. Strangely, the Ebbinghaus Battalion was disbanded shortly after the conquest of Poland. It had gained notice, however, and the Abwehr commander, Admiral Canaris, instructed Hippel to form a unit just like the Ebbinghaus Battalion, this time for the use of the Abwehr. This unit was officially founded on 15 October 1939, and was made up mostly of Ebbinghaus volunteers. It was called the Lehr und Bau Kompagnie z.b.V. 800 (Special Duty Training and Construction Company No. 800), although it was popularly known as the Brandenburg Commandos, after the city where the unit was formed.

Unlike other elite unit of the German forces, notably the SS, the Brandenburgers did not seek out "Aryans" for their recruitment. Because his unit would be working behind the lines in hostile nations, Hippel avoided Nordic Germans, looking instead for Slavs and other ethnic groups disliked by the Nazis. All members had to be thoroughly fluent in another European language, and all had to be well educated in the customs and local habits of other regions or

nations. Instead of being "racially superior" to the enemy, the Brandenburgers had to *be* the enemy, blending in and going unnoticed while performing acts of sabotage and espionage.

On May 8 1940, the Brandenburg Commandos got their first taste of action. Wearing Dutch uniforms, a number of commandos crossed the border with Holland, their target being the bridge over the Meuse river at Genep. At 2:00 in the morning on May 10, just as German forces were beginning to roll across the border, a Brandenburg *Leutnant*, Wilhelm Walther, started the attack. Disguised as Dutch military police escorting a number of German prisoners, the eight Brandenburgers took the defenders of the bridge by surprise. Two guard posts were destroyed, but three Commandos were wounded, and the posts on the far side of the bridge were not yet under control. Wearing a Dutch uniform, *Leutnant* Walther advanced on these posts, and the defenders hesitated, not wanting to shoot one of their own. This proved to be a fatal error, for the posts were then destroyed and the detonators seized, just as the first Panzers arrived to consolidate the victory.



*Brandenburgers evacuate a casualty  
from a Dutch pillbox, 1940*

After the fall of France, Hitler turned his attentions East, and the Brandenburgers, now organized as a regiment, took part in many actions. In the Balkans, they were responsible for capturing the docks of Orsova, on the Danube River. But it was in August of 1941, on the Russian front, when the Brandenburg Commandos really outdid themselves.

Early in that month, a Brandenburg unit of 62 Baltic and Sudeten Germans, led by Baron Adrian von Fölkersam, penetrated farther into enemy territory than ever before. Their mission was to secure the oil fields at Maikop. Using Red Army trucks and NKVD uniforms, Fölkersam's force infiltrated the Soviet lines and moved towards their target. Soon, however, they ran into a large band of Red Army deserters. Deciding to try and use this situation to his advantage, Fölkersam persuaded the deserters to return to the Soviet cause, and thus he was able to join with them and move at will through the Russian lines. This journey took him to his destination, Maikop, where he conferred with the city's military commander. Pretending to be a NKVD major from Stalingrad, Fölkersam persuaded the Russian general to give him a personal tour of the city's defenses. With a good knowledge of his target's strengths and weaknesses, Fölkersam formulated a plan for the capture of Maikop.

By August 8, with the German army only 12 miles away, the Brandenburgers made their move. Using grenades to simulate an artillery attack, they knocked out the communications center of the city. Fölkersam then went to the Russian officers and told them that a withdrawal was taking place. Having seen Fölkersam with their commander and lacking any communications with the rest of the Red Army, the Soviets had no choice but to believe

Fölkersam's story. The Russians left, and the German army entered Maikop on August 9 1942, without a single hostile shot.

The history of the Brandenburg Regiment ended in late 1944, but they had earned more decorations and mentions than any other unit of similar size in the entire German army. Their tactics were what later influenced such organizations as the US Navy's SEALs.

**Brandenburgers**, a German commando force used to facilitate the German advance or to hinder the opposing side's movement by employment of special weapons, co-operation with undercover agents and *ruses de guerre* which often violated the rules of war (for example, they wore Red Army uniforms in some operations behind Soviet lines).

During the preparations for the Polish campaign an organizational framework became necessary for undercover agents and those who had volunteered to execute raids. In October 1939 the Baulehr-Kompanie zbV 800 (Baulehr: construction training; zbV: special duties), the nucleus of all later Brandenburg units, was formed in Brandenburg in Germany under the command of their founder Captain Dr von Hippel. Because of a strong inflow of ethnic German volunteers and soldiers from other units this company soon increased to battalion strength and became the Baulehr-Battalion zbV 800. This and later increases in size were initiated more by military leaders in the field than by central authorities.

Subordinated to the Abwehr under the command of Admiral Canaris, the Brandenburgers were the only force at the immediate disposal of the Armed Forces High Command (OKW). For special missions Brandenburg commandos were attached to regular army units. The suggestion that Canaris created the Brandenburgers to assist with a proposed coup against Hitler does not fit in with either the pattern of their development or with their widely scattered deployment. First significant successes were the captures of the Belt bridge in Denmark during the Norwegian campaign in April 1940 and the bridge over the River Maas near Genep in the Netherlands after Hitler had launched his campaign in the West in May 1940 (see FALL GELB). These successes and additional personnel led to further expansion to regimental size and it was renamed the Lehr-Regiment Brandenburg zbV 800 which included some other special units such as a *Küstenjägerabteilung* (marine battalion) or a *Fallschirmjägerbataillon* (paratroop battalion).

In the Balkan campaign the Brandenburgers protected the oil facilities of Ploesti in Romania and secured the bridge across the River Vardar in Yugoslavia, to the west of Axiopoulos. During the invasion of the USSR in June 1941 (see BARBAROSSA) they assisted the German advance by missions such as capturing the bridge across the River Dvina at Daugavpils in Latvia and the city of Lwów. In 1942 they were deployed in North Africa and on the Eastern Front.

By the end of 1942 the regiment was first regrouped as the Sonderverband (Special Force) 800 with five regiments, then as the Brandenburg Division. Unlike regular army forces the divisional staff remained in Berlin while the units were widely scattered over all theatres of war. The spectacular successes during the early years of the war were offset later by heavy losses and failures. Costly and lengthily prepared operations had to be abandoned because of Hitler's changing priorities. This and the morally controversial methods the Brandenburgers used, as well as the precious resources in men, *matériel*, and finances they squandered, made them unpopular with other Wehrmacht units.

With the change of the division's commander in early 1943 and its increasing deployment in anti-partisan operations, and in regular infantry tasks, it lost its character as a commando unit, becoming an OKW reserve. After the removal of the division's commander, Maj-General von Pfuhlstein, because of his connections with the resistance movement against Hitler (see Schwarze Kapelle), and as a consequence of the take-over of the Abwehr by the SS in February 1944, the division was relieved of its duties, renamed the Panzergrenadier-Division Brandenburg, and integrated into the army. Some of those soldiers who were experienced in commando operations volunteered for the SS-Jagdverbände, and only the Kurfürst Regiment retained the original commando role.

At the end of the war the division was captured by the Red Army near Deutsch-Brod, north-west of Brno.



#### The Brandenburgers

We hear so much of the British Commandos, SAS, LRDG and SBS, the American Rangers, Soviet Scouts and Italian Arditi. These long-range reconnaissance and commando units are famous for their daring raids and penetrating infiltrations behind enemy lines. So what about the Germans?

Between 1939 and 1944 the Germans did have a substantial and successful commando unit raiding and operating in missions behind enemy lines. These were the Brandenburgers.

The Brandenburg unit started life as the brainchild of Hauptmann Theodore von Hippel. He was inspired by the guerrilla campaigns of General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck's in East Africa and Colonel T. E. Lawrence's campaigns in the Middle East during the First World War.

He suggested the formation of a small elite unit specially trained to penetrate the enemy's defences and seize key objectives prior to the main offensive. His ideas were rejected by the traditionalists of the German Heer Intelligence Staff, but found favour with the Abwehr, the German Intelligence Service.

The German High Command did allow von Hippel to form a battalion of specialists. They were trained in sabotage, infiltration and the capture of key bridges and junctions before the retreating enemy could destroy them. This first unit, the Ebbinghaus Battalion, took part in the invasion of Poland in 1939 and was made up primarily of Polish born Germans, fluent in the language and local customs. They were a success in their missions, but were disbanded shortly after the campaign.

Admiral Canaris, head of the Abwehr, welcomed von Hippel's ideas and asked him to form a similar unit to fall under the second section of the Abwehr (Abwehr II), which was primarily responsible for sabotage, and specialist units (Abwehr I was espionage and intelligence and Abwehr III was counter intelligence).

Many of the volunteers from the Ebbinghaus Battalion joined the new unit who set up their barracks and training in Brandenburg-am-Havel in the Prussian province of Brandenburg, hence their name.

The recruitment program ran counter to Nazi political beliefs and recruits were selected on their knowledge of languages, familiarity with other cultures and traditions and for how they could blend in with other populations.

The range of recruits came from Volksdeutsche (ethnic Germans) from all over Europe, including Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Baltic States, the Soviet Union, the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark. A company was even formed from those who had lived in Africa, Britain and the USA and had extensive knowledge of English.



The Brandenburgers were initially organised into four companies based on language and custom knowledge.

1. Kompanie (Baltic/Russian)
2. Kompanie (English, Portuguese and French Speaking from North Africa, UK and USA)
3. Kompanie (Sudeten and Yugoslav Germans)
4. Kompanie (other Volksdeutsche)

#### Methods and Missions

The Brandenburgers' initial campaigns in 1939-40 relied on surprise and subterfuge to achieve their objectives. They wore enemy uniforms over their Wehrmacht uniforms and would penetrate enemy lines using their language skills and local knowledge to get close to their objectives, before

taking them by surprise. They would then hold on until the advancing main thrust would catch up. This allowed them to capture bridges and other vital installations before the enemy could destroy them.

They took part in operations in Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and Belgium in 1940. During the invasion of the Netherlands they captured the bridge over the Meuse at Gennepe on May 8. Early in the morning a group of Brandenburgers under the command of Leutnant Wilhelm Walther advanced on the defenders of the bridge disguised as Dutch military police escorting German prisoners. Before the Dutch realised the truth the Brandenburgers were on them.

After a short fight the Germans took the bridge. Three Brandenburgers were wounded, but the guardhouses at one end of the bridge were secured. The far side of the bridge was still under Dutch control, so Leutnant Walther boldly advanced over the bridge still in a Dutch uniform. The Dutch soldiers hesitated, unsure if he was one of their own. The delay was long enough to allow the Brandenburgers to rush the last two guardhouses and stop the Dutch blowing the bridge. The leading panzer troops arrived shortly afterwards and advanced across the bridge.



By 1941 the Brandenburgers had been expanded out to a regiment.



In 1941 the Brandenburgers were once more in action in the Balkans and Russia. Dressed in civilian cloths a detachment of 54 Brandenburgers of the II. Battalion took "Iron Gates" at Orsova on the Danube during the invasion of Yugoslavia. This allowed German river traffic to continue during the campaign.

One of the most famous incidents came during the 1942 campaign in Russia. A force of 62 Brandenburgers under the command of Baron Adrian von Fölkersam penetrated far into Soviet territory. Disguised in NKVD uniforms and riding in Red Army trucks they passed themselves off so convincingly that von Fölkersam even managed to get a tour of the positions around Maikop with its commander. Before that he had rounded up a group of Soviet deserters and used them to advance to Maikop under the pretence of returning them to the line. Now ensconced among the Soviets the Brandenburgers destroy the city's communication centre and then convince the defenders that a withdrawal had been ordered. The Germans entered the city on August 9, 1942 without firing a shot.



Other long-range and seize and hold operations continued in Russia during 1942, but by 1943 the Brandenburgers were restricted to long-range reconnaissance only.



The Brandenburgers were also active in Africa. In the spring of 1941 a detachment of 60 was sent to aid Rommel's campaigns in Africa under the command of Leutnant von Koenen. It was initially intended to be used to secure the Suez Canal and the Nile crossings, but events turned at El Alamein. They Brandenburg "Afrika Kompanie" continued service in Libya and Tunisia, acting in a variety of missions putting their skills to use. Some engaged in LRDG and SAS style raiding, while others were utilised in long-range reconnaissance and sabotage. They were even used to provide escort and protection for agents being planted in Cairo, but British intelligence uncovered the plan and the agents and their Brandenburg escorts were captured. Some Brandenburgers were even used in glider operations to seize bridges.

Both airborne and seaborne specialist units were also created by 1943. The seaborne or "Küstenjäger" were involved in operations in the Sea of Azov against Soviet Naval commandos and in 1943 a unit took part in the seizing of the Greek Dodecanese Islands off the Italians and British.

See Jonathan Forsey's Article on the Dodencanese Disaster...

## Operations

**August 1939:** Ebbinghaus Battalion prevent the destruction of Vistula Bridges and sabotage of factories in Silesia.

**April 1940:** Campaigns in Denmark and Norway. Brandenburgers dressed as Danish troops capture bridge near Grossner.

Brandenburgers take part in glider assaults in Norway.

**May-June 1940:** Infiltration and capture operations in the Netherlands, Belgium and France.

**July 1940:** Prepare for Operation Sealion (invasion of Britain).

**April 1941:** Balkan campaign, the capture of Danube "Iron Gate".

**June 1941:** Operation Barbarossa infiltration and capture operations.

**June 1941:** Raid on the Abadan Oil Refinery in Iran.

**August 1941:** Brandenburgers protect against sabotage in Romanian oilfields.

**January 1942:** Operations with Indian Legion.

**Spring 1942:** Attack on Soviet rail supply route to Murmansk.

**April 1942:** Brandenburg units active in North Africa.

**Summer 1942:** Recruitment of Caucasus Volksdeutsch and others.

**August 1942:** Brandenburgers prevent the destruction of the Soviet oil refinery at Maikop by retreating Red Army troops.

**October 1942:** Anti-partisan duties in Yugoslavia.

**Autumn/Winter 1942:** Küstenjäger motorboat patrols active against Soviet Naval operations.

**November 1942:** Brandenburg Paratroopers sent to Tunisia. Take part in combined operations with Luftwaffe Fallschirmjäger.

**February 1943:** Brandenburg Paratroop Battalion raised.

## End of Special Operations

In July 1944 the Abwehr lost favour with Hitler after Abwehr chief Admiral Canaris was implicated in the plot to kill Hitler. The Brandenburg Division (as it had now become) was transferred Heer and became an Elite Motorised Infantry Division. Much of the duties of the Abwehr were taken over by the SD. 1800 Brandenburgers transfer to SS under Otto Skorzeny's SS-Jagdverbände to continue operating as special forces.



The Brandenburg Division continued to fight with distinction, but that is another story.