



## *The 33rd Waffen-Grenadier Division of the Waffen SS - Charlemagne During the Battle for Berlin-Mitte and Neukölln*



**T**he story of the *Charlemagne's* battalion in Berlin is told mainly in the words of their commander and their divisional commander recorded individually several years after the events described.

### **SS-Major-General Krukenberg's account:**

At about 2000 hours I returned to the Corps command post to get my instructions for our future employment. There the chief of staff gave me the orders to engage the *Nordland* next day in the central Defence Sector 'Z', whose commander was a Luftwaffe-Lieutenant-Colonel Seifert with his command post in the Air Ministry.

I immediately went to the Air Ministry, where I was received by Lieutenant-Colonel Seifert in the presence of his liaison officer, who constituted his whole staff! Straight away he told me that he had no need of my regimental commanders, or their staffs, because the effectives of their respective units did not amount to more than a single battalion. I retorted that more grenadiers were rejoining every day, that they were Scandinavian volunteers confident in their normal superiors and that it would be dangerous to separate them in the present



situation. Moreover, Sector 'Z' would become the core of the defence. The more one deployed experienced officers the greater would be the strength of the resistance.

Lieutenant-Colonel Seifert refuted my argument and told me that in his sector everything had been prepared in such a way that we would not need any support. He showed me a map on which were featured command posts, machine-gun nests and other combat positions. When I finally asked him if he would like to have one or two of those accompanying me to reinforce his command post, he refused in an arrogant manner. He would not change his mind, even when in order to overcome his prejudice, I told him that I had only been with Waffen-SS for a year and that during the First World War I had served in Army Headquarters. He dodged my question about what had already been done in this sector, saying that everything was being organised.

I returned to my command post in the Opera most annoyed. After a short rest, I informed the commanders of the Regiments *Danmark* and *Norge* about the orders from Corps and the attitude of Lieutenant-Colonel Seifert, asking them to use the next morning to reassemble their units and put them into order.

It should be noted here that, although Seifert had been appointed Defence Sector commander of this central sector that included the Reichs Chancellery, SS-General Wilhelm Mohnke was responsible for the defence of the Reichs Chancellery and regarded all SS troops in the immediate area as subordinate to him, a situation that only added to the general confusion at this stage of the battle.

## **27 April**

### **Krukenberg continued:**

The night of the 26th–27th April passed without disturbance. Next morning was passed in reorganising and re-supplying the troops. Towards midday the commanders of the *Norge* and *Danmark* reported that each of the two regiments disposed anew of an effective strength of between 6–700 men. I gave orders that not more than a third were to be placed at the disposition of Sector Headquarters and to continue to prepare the remainder for battle. At the same time I ordered that even if Sector Headquarters did not want to speak to them, the commanders remained responsible for their troops and that during the afternoon they should make themselves familiar in advance with the conditions in which their troops would have to fight.

Towards 1900 hours, the commanders signalled that they had found no one behind our grenadiers and that nowhere had they been able to discover the



command posts or machine-gun nests that I had indicated as ready. With that I had the impression that all the defensive plans of Sector 'Z' existed only on paper and began to realise why my offers of assistance had been refused.

I decided not to defer any longer presenting myself to the Waffen-SS liaison officer to the Führer, SS-General Fegelein, and to go myself. Describing to him what had happened, I begged him to support me in my efforts to prevent the dissipation of the only SS division in the Berlin Defence Area. Defence Sector 'Z', where it was to be engaged, would become in time of capital importance. So far its preparations existed only on paper! There would be serious consequences if the regimental commanders of the *Nordland* were to be removed, having already removed their divisional commander, SS-Major-General Ziegler, whom they fully trusted. It would then be easy to blame the Waffen-SS for any setback in the defence of Sector 'Z'.

I repeated all my objections to General Weidling, who entered the room at that moment, begging him, to his obvious annoyance, to engage the only experienced formation in the city centre under the command of its own officers. In any case, he wanted to leave Lieutenant-Colonel Seifert only the sector immediately leading to the Chancellery.

Eventually he acquiesced in subordinating the whole of Sector 'Z' to SS-General Mohnke, commander of the Chancellery, and in forming two sub-sectors: that on the right with its command post in the Air Ministry reserved for Lieutenant-Colonel Seifert. Outside the boundary formed by the centre of Wilhelmstrasse the *Nordland* would be engaged under its own officers, its sector being limited on the east side by Dönhoffplatz–Kommandantenstrasse–Alexandrinenstrasse.

Stadtmitte U-Bahn Station was nominated as the city centre command post. The *Nordland* units already engaged in Seifert's sector would stay there until relieved by others and then return to my control. General Weidling then left and I never saw him again nor received any further orders from him.

It was already 0100 hours on the morning of the 27th April when I returned to the Opera.

Meanwhile, the majority of the French volunteers of the Storm Battalion were sat, half-asleep in the entrance of a block of flats on Belle-Alliance-Platz. These troops were the remnants of only three of the companies. The 2nd Company was effectively reduced to the strength of a section, its Company Commander, Lieutenant Pierre Michel, having been gravely wounded the previous evening. The 3rd Company was down to Sergeant-Major Pierre Rostaing with twenty-five men, all the section leaders



and many of the men having been either killed or wounded in Neukölln. The 4th Company was temporarily commanded by Officer-Cadet Serge Protopopoff in the absence of Staff-Sergeant Jean Ollivier, and had had one section completely wiped out the previous day.

Detached from the battalion, the 1st Company, commanded by Second-Lieutenant Jean Labourdette, had been engaged the previous day further the west, to the north of Tempelhof Airport. One of its platoons had been engaged defending the Landwehr Canal near the Hallesche Tor while attached to a unit commanded by the signals officer of the 2nd Battalion, SS-Panzer Grenadier Regiment 24 *Danmark*, SS-Second-Lieutenant Bachmann, facing attacks from Soviet armour, shelling and mortar fire.

Meanwhile, the SS-Lieutenant Weber's Combat School had gone off in the direction of the Reichs Chancellery.

At 0500 hours the 1st Company rejoined the remains of the battalion to the relief of Captain Henri Fenet, who now had to negotiate with Lieutenant-Colonel Seifert, who wanted these men to reinforce his poorly manned sector. A section was sent off to the north, but was almost immediately eliminated by a shell-burst, which killed two men and badly wounded the other three.

The battalion adjutant, SS-Lieutenant Joachim von Wallenrodt, found accommodation for the battalion in the Thomas Keller pub opposite the Anhalter railway station, several hundred metres to the northwest, where the men were able to stretch themselves out on the tables and benches for several hours of sleep.

Meanwhile, Captain Fenet was accompanied and supported by his liaison officer, Officer-Cadet Alfred Douroux, for Fenet had been wounded in the foot by a machine-gun bullet. The pain was such that they stopped at the Regiment *Danmark's* first-aid post in the cellars of the Reichsbank, where Fenet rested for several hours in a state of semi-consciousness. At daybreak an elderly Wehrmacht officer helped him on to the *Nordland's* headquarters, which had been installed in the cellars of the Opera House since the 25th, and where SS-Major-General Krukenberg was holding a command conference. He told Fenet that he was very pleased with the work of the French battalion and that they would have the whole of the day off before reorganising into eight-man tank-destroying sections in support of the armour and assault guns based on Leipziger Strasse.

#### **Krukenberg continued:**

During the morning I returned to the Chancellery once more to introduce myself to the new sector commander, SS-General Mohnke, but met General





Krebs, who told me that the advance guard of General Wenck's army had just reached Werder, west of Potsdam. He knew nothing new about the state of negotiations with the West, but the Americans were certainly in a position to cover the 90 kilometres between the Elbe and Berlin in very little time and restore the situation in the city.

During my visit, SS-General Mohnke promised to give me all the support possible in my difficult task and told me that he would place at my disposal a company of sailors that had flown in during the night and were in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs garden. Moreover, the Nordland's SS 503rd Heavy Tank Battalion, which still had eight tanks and self-propelled guns, would remain under my command. These two trumps reinforced our defensive capability.

On the 27th April the situation was calm within the formation and only a few individual Russian soldiers tried to advance cautiously along Blücherstrasse towards the canal at the Hallesche Tor.

#### **Captain Henri Fenet continued his account:**

All morning the shells continued to crash down on the Opera House, Schloss Berlin and the surrounding area with such violence that the headquarters moved to a less unpleasant place as soon as there was a gap in the shelling. This was at the Schauspielhaus (now Konzerthaus) and then in Stadtmitte U-Bahn Station. On the way, the medical officer said that we were on Französische Strasse (French Street). Two and a half centuries ago our Huguenot ancestors had installed themselves in the area we were about to defend.

Shortly afterwards von Wallenrodt collected the battalion and the general proceeded to award Iron Crosses won the previous day in his underground command post. We were very happy to be together again and this break of several hours had been most welcome for us all. The men gathered around me bustled around, filling my pockets with sweets, chocolates and cigarettes that they had just been given. They sang happily in the underground carriages, but the party was incomplete, for No. 1 Company was still missing. What the hell had happened to Labourdette?

It was only towards the end of the afternoon that de Lacaze, an Officer-Cadet in the 1st Company, arrived with the bulk of the effectives. Labourdette was not among them. He had left with several of his men for an outer position in the U-Bahn tunnels while giving de Lacaze orders not to worry about him but to gather up the rest of the company at the stipulated time should he not have returned, in which case he should go straight to the command post. He



had not been seen since. At the last contact, he had not been at the location where he had set himself up in a primitive fashion, and it had not been possible to trace him. We were not particularly worried for the moment, for in these battle conditions several hours of delay were nothing extraordinary, but it was not much later that we learned of Labourdette's death. He had fallen in the tunnels, riddled with bullets while returning from a reconnaissance and protecting the withdrawal of his men with an assault rifle. He was 22 years old and immensely proud of having been enlisted as No. 3 in the French SS.

### **Krukenberg continued:**

Meanwhile, the 1st Company under Second-Lieutenant Labourdette was engaged in a sector better prepared with dug-in tanks and solid barricades. de Lacaze's platoon was engaged in defending one of these, whilst Croisile's platoon, reduced to 20 men, deployed in the U-Bahn to counter eventual underground probes. When they came up again, de Lacaze's platoon had disappeared. During a bombardment that followed, the platoon gathered in a small group under Officer-Cadet Robelin. There were a few casualties.

Towards midday, the company was taken over by a Wehrmacht major near Yorckstrasse S-Bahn Station. T-34 tanks were swarming about to the east. The S-Bahn bridges (over Yorckstrasse) were blown and dropped into the street. There they encountered a young French civilian whose only concern was to know how he could get back to the little factory in the area where he worked!

The company took shelter under a porch while awaiting a counterattack. Robelin left with his platoon to rejoin the Fenet Battalion, but they were never seen again. Croisile's platoon was down to 14 men, plus a Wehrmacht soldier, one airman and one Volkssturm man. Only one machine gun in firing condition remained, but they had assault rifles.

At about 1400 hours a small counterattack to enable the major to evacuate his wounded succeeded. Seven tanks arrived via Yorckstrasse and the Russians came from every-where, but hesitated tackling a group so strong. Five or six disguised as civilians and pulling a cart were fired on and fled. An old gentlemen politely asked Labourdette to remove boxes of ammunition stacked in his apartment on the 5th floor. When they were opened, they were found to contain *Panzerfausts*. What a windfall! The first T-34 to approach was missed by Croisile, but hit by the Wehrmacht soldier. However, news was scarce and uncertain, and couriers often failed to return.

Meanwhile the Sub-Sector *Stadtmitte* was occupied without incident and lookouts were posted along the Landwehr Canal. On the wings, the Regiments



*Danmark* and *Norge* had a third of their effectives in lines in the rubble south of Hollmannstrasse. In the event of an attack in force, they were to withdraw slowly to the principal line of resistance on the level of Besselstrasse and Ritterstrasse, where prepared nests of anti-tank and machine guns would offer them the necessary support.

At their command post level, the battalions and regiments held a third of their grenadiers formed into shock troops ready to move forward quickly by passages pierced through the buildings to reject any enemy that penetrated our lines.

A last third, held in relative rest in Leipziger Strasse, was to stay there. This street, just about suitable for traffic, served as a deployment route for our tanks, which were supported by groups of tank-hunting detachments of French volunteers. The remainder of the latter and the Engineer Company of the *Nordland* remained in the cellars of the Opera or the Allianz building, from where they could easily join them.

The integral occupation of Sub-Sector *Stadtmitte* failed primarily because at the beginning Lieutenant Colonel Seifert only released those elements that had been placed at his disposal slowly.

Apart from this, various groups of reinforcements continued to join us, particularly SS volunteers so that soon the whole of Europe was represented. (Among these reinforcements was a company of naval radar trainees that had been flown in and were armed with Italian rifles but had received no infantry training.) These elements remained behind the Sector wings to prevent any surprise attacks from neighbouring sectors.

As for artillery, this was assembled out of sight of aerial view in the Tiergarten under the orders of Colonel Wöhlermann, artillery chief of the LVIIth Panzer Corps, because no plans had been made for its deployment in the defence. I had the guns deployed behind our Sector at the entrance of streets leading on to the Unter den Linden, so that they could at least check any tanks surging in from the north, from the Reichstag or Schlossplatz because, despite repeated enquiries, the situation remained obscure for us.

That afternoon I went to the command post assigned to me by General Weidling, an abandoned U-Bahn wagon with broken windows, no electricity or telephone, in *Stadtmitte* U-Bahn station. Such was the command post of the *Stadtmitte* Sector in the Berlin fortress!



The vault of the station was soon pierced by a medium shell that caused us 15 wounded evacuated to the first aid post organised by the *Nordland's* senior medical officer, Colonel Dr Zimmermann, in the air raid shelter of the Hotel Adlon on Pariser Platz.

Captain Fenet was in the command post when this occurred:

News was received of the outside. The Wenck Army, which was trying to reach the capital, had reached the outskirts of Potsdam. On the other hand, the Reds had launched their big offensive across the Oder that we had been expecting for weeks and had already reached Prenzlau, which, until recently, had been the seat of the OKH. Those of our comrades that had remained in Neustrelitz while waiting to join us in Berlin would now be engaged in battle. In any case, even if the Wenck Army succeeded in getting through to us, our comrades would not be able to rejoin us.

The day was over, and as the Division feared night infiltrations by the Reds, the battalion was tasked with setting up sentry posts. That night two anti-tank commandos set off for Belle-Alliance-Platz (now Mehringplatz). The first was led by von Wallenrodt, the second by Staff-Sergeant Hennecart. Hennecart was the man who would walk through a hail of shells and bullets with his hands in his pockets and, whenever cautioned, would answer: 'I am already too old to make a corpse.' At 38 years old he was in our eyes an old man, almost ancestral, and the men venerated him. He should have received the epaulets of a second-lieutenant a long time ago, having earned them a hundred times, and should have figured on the 20th April (Hitler's birthday) promotions list. But where was it?

Time passed, but no one came back. The Division was still asking for reinforcements for its sector and, if this went on, all the battalion would soon be engaged. Douroux led me hobbling over the rubble and I do not know what ruined monument to *Stadtmitte* U-Bahn Station, where the general briefed me in detail on the situation. The whole battalion was to be engaged together at Belle-Alliance-Platz to prevent access by the Red tanks and infantry to the Reichs Chancellery via Wilhelmstrasse and Friedrichstrasse. I got up to go. 'Where are you going?' asked the general. 'To get the rest of the battalion going. We should be gone in ten minutes.'

'Don't leave here, you can't even stand! Issue your orders and remain at rest here in the command post.'

'General, it is impossible for me to remain here when all my men are in action!'





‘I find it above all impossible that you should not obey my orders,’ replied the general. ‘Don’t insist!’

Time passed slowly in this wretched underground. The Reds did not forget us, for a shell landed on the access staircase killing or wounding fifteen men. The battle continued to rage all day long and one no longer paid attention to it.

The focal point of the *Nordland*’s defence was Belle-Alliance-Platz, which was defended by a combat team of the *Danmark* under SS-Second-Lieutenant Bachmann, whose sappers attempted to demolish the Hallesche Tor Bridge, but failed to do so effectively, leaving sufficient space for tanks to cross. The first Soviet tank did so at 1430 hours, and was promptly destroyed, but others followed.

That evening Combat Team *Dircksen* of the *Danmark* was driven back on Friedrichstrasse to 200m south of *Kochstrasse* U-Bahn station, using the tunnel to withdraw as the Soviets advanced on the surface. Six Soviet tanks reached as far as Wilhlemplatz outside the Reichs Chancellery before they were destroyed.

## 28 April

The remains of the *Nordland* held positions with the *Norge* Regiment from the Spittelmark on the left flank to Kochstrasse with the *Danmark* Regiment on the right. The armour of SS-Panzer-Regiment 11 and about five *Tiger IIs* of SS-Panzer-Battalion 503 were deployed between the Tiergarten, Unter den Linden and Leipziger Strasse.

The *Charlemagne* troops had spent the night either in the Schauspielhaus cellars or near *Stadtmitte* U-Bahn station, where Eric Lefèvre later described the situation:

The HQ is now roughly organised. The telephone works. Blankets and sheets separate the different offices and services of the headquarters. One works on tables and chairs taken from here and there, and the boxes. But the lighting is dependent upon candles. There is an intimate, partly unreal atmosphere. Sounds of the battle taking place on the surface are clearly audible. Water from broken pipes oozes down the walls and covers the platform. During the final hours of the night reports from the Combat Team *Dircksen* and from Sector Z Headquarters say that Soviet tanks are still crossing the canal bridge and massing on Belle-Alliance-Platz, indicating powerful new attacks and in depth. General Krukenberg even expects a penetration as far as his own command post. A patrol commanded by SS-Lieutenant von Wallenrodt is despatched towards Wilhelmstrasse to get a precise picture of the situation. Without waiting for his return, the divisional commander sends off two French anti-tank detachments led by SS-Lieutenant Weber and Staff-Sergeant Lucien Hennecart.



The first takes men from the Combat School, the second elements of the battalion's liaison team.

At dawn Friedrichstrasse was blocked at the level of Hedemannstrasse by a combat team under SS-Lieutenant Christensen with a nucleus of grenadiers from the *Danmark* Regiment expanded by elements from the Navy, Volkssturm and Labour Service. Obstructed by rubble, pierced by craters and holes in the roof of the U-Bahn tunnel, the street was impassable to tanks, the latter forming a threat only along Wilhelmstrasse upon which it deployed today and on which the French anti-tank detachments concentrated. The leading detachment, commanded by Sergeant Eugène Vaulot, reached as far as the canal west of Belle-Alliance-Platz, but was obliged to pull back under fire from mortars and automatic weapons after having seen the mass of tanks assembled on the square.

Involved here were the 28th and 29th Guards Rifle Corps of General Chuikov's 8th Guards Army at Potsdammerstrasse and along the line of Wilhelmstrasse from Belle-Alliance-Platz respectively, together with General Badanian's 11th Tank Corps and the 50th Guards Tank Regiment, a total of 230 tanks in all. In addition, the 1st Guards Tank Army provided support with the 11th Guards Tank Corps, together with the 11th Independent Guards Tank Regiment equipped with *Josef Stalin* 2 tanks.

#### **Eric Lefèvre continued:**

A little later, the detachments of SS-Lieutenant Weber and Staff-Sergeant Hennecart took up positions on Wilhelmstrasse adjacent to SS-Lieutenant Christensen's combat team on Hedemannstrasse. Most of the men were concealed behind the ground floor or cellar windows, or inside the entrances to the buildings. Look-outs were deployed behind the heaps of rubble covering the pavements. Suddenly came the throbbing of engines, the characteristic clanking and creaking. A lone tank rolled along Wilhelmstrasse checking the terrain. Sergeant Vaulot raised the grilled sight on his *Panzerfaust* and thumbed forward the safety catch. He calmly aimed the tube on his shoulder with the foresight on the explosive head in line with the lower notch on the grill. He aimed and pressed the trigger. The detonation released a jet of flame to the rear, fatal to anyone in line behind for three metres, and there was a cloud of white smoke. The projectile, stabilised by four flanges, pierced the air at 45 metres per second. Then came the shock of the explosion, the jet of focused gas penetrating the armour with a diameter of ten centimetres, thanks to the hollow charge. A rain of metal fragments projected within the crew space, provoking the ignition of exploding shells and a series of detonations that seemed to shake the heavy machine. Then came the final explosion in a cloud of dust and smoke that dislodged the turret, spreading innumerable bits of debris around. The



experienced firer then took care to take cover by crouching against the wall or throwing himself to the ground.

For 'Gégène' – the name given to him by his comrades – it was all in the day's work, but a good job nevertheless. This plumber from Pantin was of a retiring nature, at least with regard to his superiors. In the course of the two years that he had spent in the ranks of the LVF nothing had been said of him, save as an example of discipline and application to the service. As a combatant, he had advanced slowly, no doubt with the encouragement of SS-Lieutenant Weber in the Company of Honour then in the combat school. On the 26th February, during the fighting at Elsenau in Pomerania, he had destroyed a heavy *Josef Stalin* tank, and on the 26th April he had added two more tanks to his score in Neukölln, so this was his fourth.

A change in Soviet tactics then took place that was to be repeated during the fighting. The first phase was the 'cleansing' of the route by 120 mm mortars, the effectiveness of their bombs being at its maximum in a street. Then guns of the tanks, the 85 mm of the *T 34s*, or the 122 mm of the *Josef Stalins*, and the 57 mm anti-tank guns fired their explosive shells directly at the facades of buildings where they had located firers. Under cover of this bombardment, other tanks tried to tow back the wrecks blocking the route. They were to find this more successful under cover of darkness but, for the moment, it was broad daylight. The mounting curls of smoke and the dust suspended in the atmosphere practically blocked out the spring sky. Sticking to the men, it rendered less and less discernible the brown and green flecks on their combat uniforms in which they were nearly all clad. A tenacious smell of burning rubber and decomposing bodies filtered through everywhere. The sounds of battle and the persistent rumblings became less and less perceptible to the ears over accustomed to hearing them.

#### **Fenet resumed:**

'Next morning the general seemed better disposed towards me and the report on the battalion's activities clearly pleased him. I took advantage of this to say that I was feeling much better, which was true, although I was still in a bit of a stupor, but fit enough to leave with Finck and his ammunition party.'

#### **Krukenberg continued:**

Early on the morning of the 28th April, the Soviets succeeded in crossing the canal in the vicinity of the Hallesches Tor with the aid of numerous auxiliary bridges. From then on the fighting developed building by building and in the heaps of rubble.



Casualties increased on either side. They resulted not only as the result of enemy arms, but also by the collapsing of buildings on which the enemy increasingly concentrated their artillery. Despite this, on that day and the following the grenadiers of the *Nordland* succeeded in holding their set positions against the Soviets with the exception of some local penetrations and breaches. The fighting against their accompanying tanks by self-propelled guns, but above all by the French anti-tank troops, played an important role in the resistance.

Thus Sergeant Eugène Vaultot, having already destroyed two enemy tanks with Panzerfausts within 24 hours in Neukölln, went on to destroy another six Russian tanks in the same manner. On my recommendation, he was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, which I presented to him by candlelight on the morning of the 29th in my command post in the S-Bahn station in the presence of my staff and his French comrades.

In my short address in French, I said that the personal conduct of this young volunteer was in accordance with what French soldiers were renowned for historically for their bravery on all the world's fields of battle.

In all, the number of enemy tanks definitely knocked out in our sector mounted to 108, of which at least a half was attributable to the French volunteers. This demonstrates well the severity of the fighting and explains why the Soviets were unable to penetrate the front in our sector.

At the divisional command post it was decided to reinforce the forward positions. SS-Major-General Krukenberg decided to keep Captain Fenet with him at this command post.

The majority of the Storm Battalion's men remained in reserve in the cellars of the Schauspielhaus, where some of them amused them-selves by donning stage costumes. Some were wounded while collecting rations, for the Soviet artillery and ground-attack aircraft were a constant menace to all movement. Staff-Sergeant Jean Ollivier from the 4th Company had two MG 44s installed in an anti-aircraft role at the entrance to the shelter situated alongside the little public garden next to the French cathedral, and this was how Officer-Cadet Protopopoff, a 'White Russian', succeeded in bringing down one of two aircraft flying over the Gendarmenmarkt.

#### **Captain Fenet resumed:**

We all left together after visiting Staff-Sergeant Hennecart, who had been wounded and just been brought in. We found him sitting pensively in one of





the carriages serving as a first aid post. He had been hit in the leg and knee during a bombardment and was unable to stand upright.

Finck took me along the tunnels as far as Kochstrasse. Access to the firing position was not at all easy. One had to pass through blocks of buildings and climb down a ladder into a yard to finally arrive at the firing line. SS-Lieutenant Weber, the young combat school commander, a man who needs at least one tank for breakfast every morning, took me into a low room from which one had an excellent view of Wilhelmstrasse. He took me by the arm while putting a finger to his lips and led me to the loophole. 'Look!'

There was a stationary T-34 only three metres away. Its turret bore the mortal wound of a *Panzerfaust*. Short flames were emerging from the transmission and were gently licking the carcass. 'Isn't that a beauty!' said Weber in a low voice. It surely was, and he was the one responsible for this fine bit of work; yet another one. He then gave me a detailed account of the day's work; five or six tanks destroyed with *Panzerfausts*, and numerous infantry attacks repulsed with severe losses for the Reds. However, we were reduced entirely to our own resources; not a tank, gun, mortar, not a single rifle grenade. All we had left were the *Panzerfausts*, assault rifles and several MG-42 machine guns, not much. On the other hand, the Reds in front of us had tanks in plenty. The more we destroyed, the more they replaced them. They still had anti-tank guns, and a pack of 120mm mortars, an infantryman's worst enemy in the open. Their infantry, which had been quite timid until then, now appeared to be quite numerous. But what did that matter, we 'held the Cup' and our men were fighting mad.

At the battalion command post I was received by yells of joy from the runners, who hastened to relate their latest exploits. Really, their tally was quite considerable, and there was no stopping them. Roger and his acolytes located a big building that the Russians had occupied in strength. They had infiltrated the cellars and set light to them, then left to cover the exits and waited patiently. When the fire reached dangerous proportions, the Reds evacuated precipitately without taking any precautions, only to be met by a fusillade from assault rifle grenades that caused carnage. Those who tried to get into the street or courtyards were immediately cut down by the assault rifles, and those who tried to take shelter in the rooms still intact were tackled with hand-grenades.

They were all killed, one after another. When it was over, they had counted about fifty bodies scattered around the building or in the entrance. The operation had taken place at night in the light of the flames. 'It was better than the cinema,' declared Roger.



### **Krukenberg resumed:**

On the morning of the 28th April, the patrols sent towards Belle-Alliance-Platz (especially that led by SS-Lieutenant von Wallenrodt, the battalion adjutant and German liaison officer) failed to return, for the whole battalion was soon engaged on Belle-Alliance-Platz as an anti-tank commando to prevent the Russians access to Wilhelmstrasse and Friedrichstrasse. The Soviets were again checked there with heavy losses.

The main action was near Kochstrasse U-Bahn Station, where five or six tanks were destroyed by the French during the day, who had neither armour, artillery, anti-tank guns, nor mortars, but only several MG-42s, assault rifles and Panzerfausts to oppose the Soviet T-34 tanks, anti-tank guns and 120mm mortars.

A building occupied by the enemy was set on fire by the French, while others covered the windows with assault rifles to prevent the Russians fleeing the flames. Some fifty bodies were counted at this place. The fighting was ferocious, from door to door, window to window.

## **29 April**

### **Krukenberg continued:**

At daybreak a fresh attack by Russian tanks was stalled, but the enemy began a terrible bombardment of all the buildings held by the French. The battle had reached a pitch that was to be maintained to the end. It was hell.

The competitive spirit was such that men took the remaining *Panzerfausts* to claim 'their' tank. Sergeant Roger Albert already had three to his credit.

The enemy fire directed at the French increased, forcing them to withdraw about 50 metres. A new surprise attack was repulsed. Two more tanks were destroyed and one damaged, with the support of our 120mm mortars and nests of resistance.

The battalion sector was almost surrounded once more. A little counterattack by the Main Security Office Germans at the cost of heavy losses permitted the re-alignment of our positions before the next massive tank attack. This failed in its turn, because the first two tanks, having been knocked out, blocked the way for the others. The pounding continued.



Sergeant-Major Rostaing, commanding the 3rd Company (ex 6th Company of Regiment 58), which was uniquely composed of former members of the LVF, received the Iron Cross First Class for his brave conduct and Second-Lieutenant Albert the same for his fourth tank.

The battalion was occupying an advance post of the local defence several hundred metres from the Chancellery. The attacks by Russian tanks soon gave up and Russian infantry infiltrated a little everywhere using flamethrowers or grenades.

The battalion fought on, the lightly wounded returning to their posts as soon as they had been bandaged. Staff-Sergeant Ollivier, commanding the 4th Company, was three times wounded and three times evacuated, but returned three times to his post. Many of the young officer-cadets from Neweklau fell in action: Le Maignan, Billot, and Protopopoff were killed.

The bombardment raged and the city was in flames all night of the 29th–30th April, but all the French SS were resolved to hold out until their ammunition ran out.

Once more we were sustained by high hopes for the arrival of Wenck's army, but we started becoming sceptical about this subject. We learned nothing about it either from the commander of the city's defence or from the Chancellery.

During a relatively quiet interlude, SS-Lieutenant Weber visited Captain Fenet with Sergeant Vaultot, who had destroyed four tanks in Wilhelmstrasse the previous day, and Sergeant Roger Albert, who had destroyed three. But before the dust had even settled, there was another tank attack with the tanks well spaced out and the leading two were stopped with *Panzerfausts*. The tanks behind withdrew after firing at the buildings. According to Fenet, there was a dramatic situation at his command post:

The floors collapsed and the rooms of our semi-basement were filled with a dust so thick that we had great difficulty in breathing and were unable to see more than 50 centimetres. The ceiling fell in pieces and several of the men were injured by falling masonry. In an angle of the wall where we had made a loophole, there was now a gaping hole in the angle of fire from the tanks.

Moreover, the Soviet infantry were in the process of surrounding the building containing the command post. A little more to the east, in Friedrichstrasse, which was impractical for the tanks, the *Chnstensen* Combat Team had been in action since dawn. The fighting line was now 150–200m beyond Kochstrasse U-Bahn station and Puttkammerstrasse. Also Soviet infantry were installed in the upper storeys of the



neighbouring buildings and firing on anything that moved. But they were not occupying the lower storeys and the French set these buildings on fire with large stocks of paper that they had found in the cellars and could thus use the cover of the fire to effect a withdrawal, despite the protestations of SS-Lieutenant Weber, who wanted to hold on at all costs.

**Fenet continued:**

The new front line was based on the Puttkamerstrasse crossroads, 140 to 150 metres further back from the previous one. The internal courtyards here provided relatively safe passage. The new forward command post was installed in a building that was still standing, where it was necessary to block the large entrances, apart from the large gaps made by the bombardment in its façade. The cellars and ground floor, where the men installed themselves, were full of works of art. Two women were still living there and at first refused to leave.

While the new positions were being arranged, the Soviet 120-mm mortars, which had not been heard since the day before, proceeded to reduce to dust those of their infantry that had not broken contact!

No doubt it was at this instant that Officer-Cadet Protopopoff of the 4th Company was killed. He was talking to Sergeant-Major Rostaing in one of the courtyards situated behind the command post building and had been directed towards a porch when a shell exploded in the yard, riddling him with shrapnel.

A catastrophic counterattack was launched by the old officers and NCOs from the Main Security Office, who suffered frightful losses in trying to establish forward look-outs. Then the infantry pressure combined with a fresh tank attack, the third that day. The machines advanced in tight groups of seven or eight, a tactic with the aim of swamping the *Panzerfaust* firers, but the latter were not overawed by this. The two leading tanks were stopped and blocked the route. The five or six others withdrew, then came forward again to tow away the dead ones. Numerous shots with *Panzerfausts* forced them back a second time. The volunteers of the French battalion knew that they had to immediately take cover. However, not all!

When the Soviet tank guns and anti-tank guns concentrated their fire on the basement windows, Sergeant-Major Rostaing remained in his observation post on the second floor of a building offering a good view of Wilhelmstrasse. He had rejoined the battalion that day with the 20 to 25 remaining men of the 3rd Company. Rostaing was in a stairwell with a French grenadier. The two men were flat against the wall on one side and an opening whose glass and frame had long since disappeared. They remembered seeing a vast tank firing,





no doubt a *Josef Stalin*. The shell hit the ceiling above two lookouts, covering them with debris and tearing away a main beam that fell on them. Other men witnessed the event. They went up to the storey, called out, but did not see anyone and went down again. The NCO did not recover consciousness for a considerable time later, and got out without difficulty. He staggered to the command post, covered with dust.

It was from Captain Fenet that Sergeant-Major Rostaing learnt that he and Sergeant Albert, who had just destroyed his fourth tank, had been awarded the Iron Cross First Class. The awards were made in the one of the building's interior courtyards. No doubt it was then that SS-Lieutenant von Wallenrodt received his Iron Cross Second Class. Captain Fenet had hardly shaken the hands of the recipients when fresh shells hit the building, raising enormous clouds of dust. 'We stayed there blind, suffocated, without being able to move a step, and it was a while before we regained the use of our senses,' wrote Captain Fenet later.

SS-Lieutenant Christensen had quit his command post on the left at Kochstrasse U-Bahn station to conform with the French, passing round several bottles of wine with which to refresh their throats.

On the other hand, Captain Fenet seemed to have only a hazy picture of the *Müncheberg* Tank Division's sub-sector on the right. Reports coming from there that day indicate otherwise than all communications had been severed with the *Nordland*:

Soviet spearheads have reached the Anhalter Railway Station some 200–300 metres from the French positions. However, a *Tiger II* of SS-Panzer-Regiment *Hermann von Salza*, the '314' of SS-Sergeant Diers – one of the two still at the disposal of the Division – is stationed on Potsdammer Platz and is keeping Saarlandstrasse under fire with its formidable 88mm gun, which has hit several tanks trying to come up the road towards the north-west.

That evening, after several more tank attacks supported by infantry, the problem of effectives became of concern to Captain Fenet, who had seen the number of losses increase, even with the lightly wounded remaining at their posts. He now only had one officer, one officer-cadet and a sergeant-major left, SS-Lieutenant von Wallenrodt, Officer-Cadet Douroux and Sergeant Major Rostaing. Officer-Cadets Protopopoff, Billot, Le Maignan and Karanga had been killed, Officer-Cadet de Lacaze and Staff-Sergeant Ollivier wounded and evacuated. Second-Lieutenant Aimé Berthaud had been evacuated after having been found unconscious under the ruins of a balcony. Officer-Cadets Boulmier and Jacques Frantz had also been evacuated, the latter in a tent-half, after being hit by mortar fire.



Sergeant Eugène Vaulot had also left the front line for the divisional command post after receiving the Knight's Cross that evening in candlelight from SS-Major-General Krukenberg on the station platform, being the first of the French volunteers to receive this decoration. Three other members of the *Charlemagne* were awarded the Knight's Cross that day, making this the record number for any contingent in the battle for the city and demonstrating the importance of their anti-tank role. The destruction of sixty-two tanks, a tenth of the numbers engaged against this sector, was attributed to the *Charlemagne* alone.

During a visit to the Reichs Chancellery first-aid post after having been wounded in the shoulder after destroying his thirteenth Soviet tank, SS-Lieutenant Wilhelm Weber, reported to SS-Major-General Mohnke, who, greatly impressed, had then recommended Knight's Cross awards for Weber, Captain Fenet and Staff-Sergeant Appolot (six tanks) to General Wilhelm Burgdorf, head of the Army personnel branch.

## 30 April

### Krukenberg continued:

On the morning of the 30th April, as I learnt later, General Weidling had held a commanders' conference at the Bendlerblock, in which one could speak freely about the situation. But, despite the central importance of his sector, SS-General Mohnke was not invited anymore than myself as commander of the *Nordland* Division, which constituted the main fighting force of the LVIIth Panzer Corps, and whose command I had taken over at his request.

The volume of fire on the city centre had increased and our positions subjected to the fire of 'Stalin-Organs'. The battle seemed to be reaching its climax, but the enemy had hardly penetrated our sector and we prepared for more assaults from him. Ammunition and Panzerfausts were deposited along our main line of resistance and on Leipziger Strasse. Unfortunately, four of our tanks, whose guns were still capable of firing, had been immobilised by direct hits.

The usual evening conference at the Sector 'Z' commander was called off without explanation. To our surprise, enemy artillery fire in our sector lessened towards midnight and almost completely ceased.

### Captain Fenet resumed his account:

Now we receive a big reinforcement. A good hundred men from the Main Security Office, armed with rifles and flanked by three or four SS-majors, two SS-Captains and five or six other officers. All are full of good will and courage,



but have long become unaccustomed to handling weapons and lack combat training. Most are between 50 and 60 years old. Nevertheless, their arrival enables a considerable strengthening of the battalion and besides they mix in with plenty of spirit. However, they soon realise that they are in no way prepared for such a pitiless battle. Their losses are serious, because the Reds, like ourselves, even more than us, have their elite snipers hidden everywhere and take aim at any silhouette appearing at a window or in a yard.

De Lacaze, who since the beginning of the battle has led his men with astonishing confidence for a debutant, neutralises every attempt by the Red infantry, but he too falls to an enemy sniper and has to be evacuated. Here is Roger again with his usual accomplice, Bicou, at 18 the youngest NCO in the battalion. They are both excited and explain that they have just dislodged several Red snipers from the rooftops.

There are some more there, but we have run out of grenades. While speaking, they are stuffing their pockets with egg grenades, attaching others to the buttons of their jackets, and sticking stick grenades into their belts. They rush off.

Sometime later Bicou returns with his head bowed. 'We got them, captain, but Roger was wounded.'

Roger comes in paler than usual, a trickle of blood running from his right eye. At the last moment a piece of grenade caught him above the eyelid. We sit him down in the only armchair in the building, where he soon dozes off. A little later Bicou takes him to the medical aid post with a group of wounded, then comes back alone.

'Poor Roger, the fighting is over for him. The doctor says that the eye is lost and he still does not know whether he can save the other one.'

Bicou himself is lucky. During the day he had taken shelter behind a pile of debris that was hit by an anti-tank shell. He didn't even get a scratch, but was knocked unconscious. An hour later he was on his feet again. Now he takes over the section with a sombre air, vowing that Roger's eye will cost dear.

It is quite calm as night draws to an end. There is nothing in the street but the T-34 burning alongside us, long flames dancing around the steel carcass, projecting their violent light against the dark night which the rose-coloured halo of fires above the roofs is unable to disperse. One hears the crackling of the flames mixing with the distant, confused sounds of fighting in the capital. But sometimes we are startled by heartbreaking cries, cries that are no longer



human, the voices of women not far from us howling in their distress, despair and anguish as the men from the steppes assert their bestiality.

With daybreak the Red tanks set off again and we are alerted by the sound of their engines starting up. Several well directed *Panzerfausts* and the first wave is easily stopped, because the tanks are following each other well spaced out, which gives us plenty of time to see them coming and to give each one the greeting it deserves.

Of course, having checked this first attempt, we are subjected to the usual bombardment. The tanks and anti-tank guns fire full out at the buildings where they detect our presence. The walls tremble dangerously, plaster falls on our heads, and sometimes a well aimed shot into a window opening or loophole showers us with earth and stones and plunges us into a spell of powdery obscurity. Already yesterday and nightfall were hard enough, but now the battle is about to reach a climax and maintain it to the end. Up to this point we have been living in an infernal din, pounded ceaselessly by mortars, anti-tank guns and tanks, harassed by the infantry, repelling several tank attacks an hour. Weber, whose tally is already quite considerable, brings a young NCO from his combat school, Sergeant Eugène Vaultot, a tall, blond chap who has already bagged four tanks since yesterday, another sergeant, Roger Albert, who has his third and is claiming a fourth. As there are not enough *Panzerfausts* for everyone, they all want the chance to bag at least one tank.

The more our resistance hardens, the more the enemy fires at us. In the command post building, which has become the main point of resistance, we expect the walls to collapse over our heads at any moment. The façade is already completely cracked and one can feel the building sway with every blow. Sooner or later we will have to evacuate or be wiped out or buried, but I delay the departure as long as possible, for the configuration of the area is such that if we evacuate this building, our whole front will have to pull back at least 50 metres if we are want to find another suitable location, and 50 metres now is not that easy. We are only several hundred metres from the Reichs Chancellery.

No doubt believing us *hors de combat*, the Reds launch another tank attack, but this time without an artillery preparation, but we are not dead yet. The result is two tanks destroyed and a third damaged. The attacking wave turns round. Now they are going to make us pay for this disappointment. Once the tanks are out of range of our *Panzerfausts*, they aim their guns at us again and every barrel they have fires at us. The upper storeys collapse, the rooms of our semi-basement are filled with such thick dust that we can hardly breathe and we can only see 50 centimetres in front of us. The ceiling falls in pieces and several men are injured by falling masonry. The loophole that we had made in





the angle of the wall has become a gaping hole right in line with the tanks' line of fire. The next bombardment will bring a general collapse. Moreover, the Russians are working dangerously on our left wing and are making their way across the ruins to encircle our whole block of buildings, and all our exits are now under fire. Nevertheless, we have to leave; in ten minutes it will be too late. Our troops are engaged in neutralising the Red snipers stationed in a big building opposite from the neighbouring houses. Their building has vast cellars, which the Ivans have neglected to occupy that are full of enormous quantities of paper. We set them on fire and, while Ivan plays fireman, we get out. Saluted on our way by several burst of fire and some grenades, we manage to get through without losses and cross the field of ruins that separates us from our new positions without difficulty. Only one building in three is still standing in this area.

*According to Krukenberg, this move took place at 1800 hours.*

The new front will be easier to defend, for a system of interior courtyards provides excellent communications protected from the enemy, a small compensation for the 50 metres we have just lost. There is only one dangerous corner, alongside Friedrichstrasse, where a ruined building, very difficult to keep an eye on, offers our opponents magnificent possibilities for infiltration.

We quickly set up our sentries, for the Reds are not going to waste any time. Our old east front enemies, the 120mm mortars, take us on and keep lashing us right until the very end, harassing us with the diabolical precision to which they are accustomed. The infantry too engage strongly. We have to mount a little attack in order to set up new forward positions to obtain a little peace, relatively speaking. This is done by the men from the Main Security Office, who carry out the operation with remarkable spirit. Unfortunately, for lack of support from heavy weapons, our losses are very heavy.

While the infantry are fighting it out furiously, another tank attack begins. This time the Reds have taken into account the errors they have been making until now. Instead of arriving one by one to serve as ideal targets for our *Panzerfausts*, seven or eight set off together and remain bunched together, only a few metres apart from each other. They want to make us concentrate to maintain the effectiveness of our fire. Fortunately, our men are up to this change of tactics. The two leading tanks block the middle of the street, barring the way for the others, who are obliged to turn around. Shortly afterwards there is another alarm, this time the Reds are trying to tow away their wrecks to clear the street for their next attack, so again there a fine scrap.



We have hardly time to draw breath before the next shelling begins. Sergeant-Major Rostaing, commanding No. 3 Company, is buried under the debris of his observation post on the second floor. They call him and someone climbs up to the second floor with difficulty, but nothing moves, where is he under all this debris? An hour later he reappears, somewhat haggard, saying that he had been knocked unconscious by the fall of the ceiling, and had only just regained consciousness.

I award him the Iron Cross First Class in a little courtyard nearby, and also Roger Albert, who has just bagged his fourth tank. While we are shaking hands, another tornado falls on us, raising clouds of dust so thick that we remain blinded, suffocated, unable to move a foot, no longer knowing where we are, and it takes a moment or two before we regain the use of our senses.

We begin to get bad headaches. Outrageously smothered with dust, our eyes shining, deep in their sockets, our cheeks lined, we hardly look human. Water is scarce and we often don't even have enough to drink. Occasionally a few rations arrive from Division. One eats what one can find, when one can find it, otherwise, in the feverish state we are in, it is not a problem that concerns us much. After the days we have just been through, we are now only acting on our reflexes, and everything we do seems as natural as everyday life. We seem to have been living this infernal life for ever, the problem of the future does not even arise, and we see ahead of us more days like this, knocking out tanks, firing at the Reds, throwing grenades, alarms, bombardments, fires, ruins, holding on, not allowing the enemy to pass. All our strength, all our energy is only for this, it is simultaneously our reason for living and for dying.

I get visitors from time to time, particularly from an officer of the *Nordland* commanding a neighbouring company. He comes, he says, to refresh himself with us, although he does not seem to need it. He does not hesitate to express his admiration for his French comrades. Every time he comes he repeats: 'While you are there, we are content that all is well and certain that the sector will hold.' He only knows how to show his sympathy, and thanks to him, we can pass around several bottles of wine, from which everyone drinks a symbolic mouthful with pleasure.

In one place or another, our frontline positions are shrivelling up, and we are now in front of the lines, an advance defence post in front of the Reichs Chancellery. Also, more and more the Reds hound us. We no longer keep count of the tank attacks, the infantry are more and more aggressive, and abandoning frontal assaults, now attempt to penetrate a little everywhere to dislodge us with grenades or flame-throwers. If the Red's losses are high, our effectives are also diminishing, even though only the severely wounded are evacuated; the



others make do with a summary bandaging and carry on fighting, or take a few hours' rest in the first aid post before returning to their positions. Staff-Sergeant Ollivier, commanding No. 4 Company, beats all records in this field. Hit three times, three times evacuated, he has calmly returned to his post three times. Our young officers, second-lieutenants and officer-cadets, have already paid a high price: Labourdette, Le Maignan, Billot, Protopopoff, killed, de Lacaze, Bert, François, Ulmier, seriously wounded. Weber, who since the beginning has shown an extraordinary ardour, and has put all his energy into it, has been evacuated in his turn with a serious injury. In all the unit only Douroux and von Wallenrodt remain uninjured among the officers. Douroux is very proud of the fact that an officer of the *Nordland* removed his own Iron Cross to award him with it after an engagement in which he had performed marvellously. As for von Wallenrodt, he remains very calm and very much at ease in all this din, a former war correspondent, he is at once both spectator and actor, acquitting himself remarkably in his new role as adjutant. He also receives a well earned Iron Cross.

The command post is in a large library that has some magnificent works of art. One of us has pulled out an album of coloured pictures of Spain, which becomes a distraction for men taking a break. We flip through it in search of sunny country scenery as an antidote to our vision of hell. Passing the rows of bookshelves, I am angered by the thought that they will become victims to the flames, or worse, will be torn up and trampled underfoot by bands of drunken Mongols.

We are living in scenes from another world: the days are the colour of the dust that overcomes and devours us. We no longer see the blue sky, being absorbed in a gritty fog that only dissipates at rare moments until a new torrent of missiles plunge us back into yellowish opaqueness. Buildings are burning everywhere, ruins collapse with a great noise, thickening the atmosphere with soot, dust and smoke, which we breathe with difficulty. The silence that follows a bombardment is only the prelude to a roaring of engines, the clanking of tracks, announcing another wave of tanks. Crouched in the doorways or behind windows with *Panzerfausts* in our hands, we await our turn to release the storm. A long tongue of flame behind the firer, a violent explosion, shortly followed by another marking the arrival of a mortal blow, almost always firing at point blank range, which is more certain. The explosions follow each other within several seconds: one, two, sometimes three tanks are immobilised in the middle of the street. The others retire and several minutes later they return to tow back the dead carcasses under cover of clouds of dust raised by the bombardment that always follows an aborted attack.



The battle continues to rage throughout the night. How can one describe the night? Darkness, chased away by this enormous brazier that the city has become, has vanished and only the colour of the light varies by the hour. The burning buildings and tanks are our torches, and Berlin is illuminated by the fire devouring it. A sinister clarity hangs over the city, now suffused with a reddish glow on which the flames rising around us shed their violent light. Beneath this tragic display the ruins cutting the incandescent sky take on unreal, incredible shapes,

The rumbling upheaval of the battle has now submerged all the city, which fiercely struggles and fights on not to let itself be engulfed by defeat, prolonging its hopeless agony to the extreme limit. In this duel to death, as the hours pass and the enemy accumulates against us more tanks, more men, more shells, our determination only grows, our resolution hardens more. Hold on, the words always returns to our lips, invades our spirit as an obsession. Hold on, as if tomorrow will be like today, like yesterday. Until when? The question no longer arises: as long as we have bullets, grenades, *Panzerfausts*. The Red infantry continue to bite the dust, the tanks, despite their furious assaults, are checked in front of or inside our lines, where they burn in agony. We can see the flames emerging between the tracks, then climbing progressively up to the turret, while the ammunition explodes in an uninterrupted series of detonations that shake the steel carcass belted with fire until a formidable explosion shakes the whole area, sending enormous chunks of steel flying until nothing remains of the tank but a mass of twisted, blackened scrap.

On the evening of the 30th April a Russian is brought to the command post who had allowed himself to be captured without difficulty. He is a Ukrainian NCO, a big, well fed lad. He brings with him several loaves of bread, which the men share between them with pleasure, for they haven't seen anything like that for several days. In exchange the prisoner is given cigarettes, which seems to please him. Very talkative, he explains to the interpreter that he is Ukrainian and not Russian. Compulsorily mobilised, and a ferocious adversary of bolshevism, so much so that we could not have a better friend than himself in the Red Army. Of course we are under no illusions about the sincerity of his good will, but we pretend to listen with interest. Confident, he chats with the interpreter, replying at length to the questions negligently put to him during the course of the conversation. A communiqué has been distributed in the Red lines today announcing imminent victory; there is only one square kilometre left in Berlin to be taken, and this last bastion must be taken by tomorrow in honour of the 1st May. A burst of laughter greets the translation of these last words: 'We will still be here tomorrow, old chap, and your pals will get the same as usual if they try and pass!'





He recognises that we are giving them a hard time and that morale in the area leaves much to be desired, but we don't believe our ears when he adds that the tank crews will only board at pistol point. The interpreter asks good humouredly if he is kidding us. 'Niet! Those getting into the leading tanks know that they will not be coming back!'

**SS-Major-General Krukenberg resumed his account:**

During the night and morning of the 1st May the battle continued with extreme violence. The Russians were glued to the ground with the fire from our assault rifles. That afternoon the enemy resorted to using flamethrowers to reduce isolated points of resistance, an effective tactic, for there was no water to extinguish the flames.

Tuesday, the 1st May, at about 0700 hours in the morning, I was summoned by telephone by SS-General Mohnke, who told me that during the night General Krebs (a former military attaché in Moscow), Colonel von Dufing and Lieutenant Colonel Seifert had crossed the lines in the latter's sector to conduct negotiations with the Soviets. He could not give me the exact details about this mission, but he gave the impression that one could no longer count upon being relieved by Wenck's army, which had been forced to withdraw by superior enemy forces.

Contrary to expectations, General Krebs and his companions, for whom those opposite had guaranteed free access, had still not returned or reported their news, despite an existing radio link. He suggested a possibility of betrayal and said that now the Soviets knew the weakness of our defences we could now expect a sudden attack.

We had been able to establish that the Potsdammer Platz S-and U-Bahn stations were not barricaded, thus offering an opportunity for an enemy shock troop to approach the Chancellery via Voss-Strasse. I should do the necessary in this respect, but before all else, go to the Air Ministry and take charge of the Seifert sub-sector from its commander. It seemed to him that there were things going on there that I should suppress by all means.

I crossed Wilhelmplatz under enemy fire accompanied by a Franco-German escort and advanced along Wilhelmstrasse as far as the Air Ministry, on which there were no security guards, although the Russian mortars and anti-tank guns were only several hundred yards away.

There was an old Luftwaffe general asleep in the cellars of the Air Ministry with a hundred airmen. Then I came across a young army captain, who was the



staff watch keeper for the sub-sector, who told me that Lieutenant Colonel Seifert, having told him he had no need of anyone, had shut himself in his office with his liaison officer to apparently destroy documents. I immediately went with him to the sector command post in which he was the only member of Lieutenant Colonel Seifert's staff. We entered into a lively discussion, during which, having explained my mission, he refused to tell me what had happened the day before, nor where his commander was, when the latter entered the room escorted by two NCOs from my escort, having found him in another part of the building.

Soon afterwards a message arrived from Mohnke's command post explaining what had happened was due to a misunderstanding and that the order given that morning was now nul and void.

I returned to my sector at about 1000 hours, not before begging Lieutenant Colonel Seifert to finally return the men of the *Nordland* and the Frenchmen that were still in his sector.

Towards noon I received an order to immediately place the last 'Tiger' tank of our tank battalion at SS-General Mohnke's disposition. No indication of what was happening at higher level filtered through to us.

At 1900 hours I was summoned by SS-General Mohnke and took my operations officer (Ia) and adjutant with me. SS-Major-General Ziegler approached me in the antechamber to the command post, saying: 'It has just been announced that Hitler committed suicide yesterday after-noon. Apparently he married Fegelein's sister-in-law. The latter tried to flee from the Chancellery in civilian clothes and has been shot. Goebbels and his family are also dead!'

Then SS-General Ziegler added that for several days now no one had expected Wenck's army to succeed, and that the negotiations with the west, entered into with too great an optimism, had failed. We had been deceived from above on all these points for several days now. All the sacrifices made by the troops had been in vain. We had been abused in the worst possible way. How was I going to tell those under my command when I could reproach myself most for my good faith?

SS-General Mohnke appeared after a long wait accompanied by Reich Youth Leader Axmann and in short sentences told me what I already knew from SS-General Ziegler. Then he recalled the nocturnal attempt by General Krebs to obtain an immediate stop to the fighting in Berlin to prevent any further



shedding of blood. General Chuikov facing us refused and demanded an unconditional surrender.

This was unacceptable. Thus, basing himself on a very old order, SS-General Mohnke asked me if I, being the most senior officer in my rank, would continue to assure the defence of the city, in which case all troops still available would be placed under my command. I rejected this stupid idea.

Then, he said, there is nothing else to do than follow the order already given by General Weidling for the remainder of the Berlin garrison to attempt to pierce the Soviet encirclement in small groups. In answer to my question, he said that the rest was up to every one of us; the general direction was Neuruppin and then on in a north-westerly direction.

Everything was now on the move. It was impossible to obtain information about the situation in other parts of the city. Each of the groups assembling with a view to breaking out had to make its own necessary reconnaissance.

Finally, in order to avoid chaos, the news of the death of Hitler and the other events we had been told about were not to be divulged until 2100 hours that evening. According to General Weidling's orders issued to all sectors, the defence would cease everywhere at 2300 hours.

All the rest, including the choice of routes, was left to the individual sectors. No rear guard was anticipated. SS-General Ziegler said that he would rejoin the *Nordland* for the breakout. In leaving the Chancellery, I saw no disorder in the rooms or corridors.

The commanders had carte blanche for the careful with-drawal of their troops from 2300 hours onwards, the little posts remaining behind until midnight would mask the total evacuation of our positions from the enemy. At midnight, Regiments *Norge* and *Danmark* left Leipziger Strasse, heading north via Charlottenstrasse and Friedrichstrasse. The U-Bahn tunnel could only be used under the most disciplined conditions and with intervals between groups. It was nevertheless necessary to leave it at Friedrichstrasse S-Bahn Station, for the tunnel was blocked by a solid grille preventing passage under the Spree.

In fact this 'grille' was a waterproof steel bulkhead, normally closed at night for security reasons, and had a guard of two transport-authority watchmen, who refused to open it as to do so would be against regulations!



We took a pause to regroup and decide north of the Spree near the Grand Opera. I myself was in Albrechtstrasse attempting to explore the possibilities with some officers who knew the area well.

Having abandoned my command post a little after midnight and taken the convenient route with my staff and the accompanying French detachment, I sent my liaison officer, SS-Second Lieutenant Patzak to the Air Ministry to collect the men of the Nordland and the French still in that sector. According to a report by Captain Fenet, the latter were engaged in the vicinity of Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse. It is not known whether this officer reached there or whether he was killed on the way. Captain Fenet never received my orders.

## 1 May

### **Captain Fenet continued his account:**

That Ukrainian hadn't lied. All night and all morning of the 1st May the storm of the Red assaults beats against us with desperate violence, but we are determined to respond with defiance. The Red infantry has been reinforced and launches waves of attack simultaneously with the setting off of the tanks. We let the T-34s approach to fire at point blank range, while pinning down the infantry with our assault rifles. The latter try to advance again, but they don't get far and soon they don't get up again.

The Russian concentrate their tanks barely 300 metres away, and the infantry move round behind that steel barrier. We know the buildings they are using, from where the deluge of fire fails to crush us, and of which we easily have the advantage. We have to wait until they are quite close at the end of a rifle or *Panzerfaust*, so close that several missed shots could open up the way and cause the front to collapse. The fate of the battle depends on the outcome of every attack. The Reichs Chancellery is being fiercely defended. One moment of weakness, one inattention on our part, and we would have the catastrophe that threatens, always more precisely to the extent that it consumes our strength and our effectives go on in this battle of hell.

During a particularly violent attack, a T-34 succeeds in passing and is only knocked out 30 metres behind our first position. For several moments a terrible anxiety seizes us, as if an abyss has opened beneath our feet. But no, it cannot be said that a Red tank has succeeded in penetrating our lines with impunity. There is a second explosion and the intruder is immobilised.

The situation worsens during the afternoon. Our building, practically intact when we occupied it, has now fallen into ruins, and if the ground floor is



still holding, long strips of parquet are hanging down to the street, a perfect target for the Red flame-throwers, who, taking advantage of the scarcity of our troops, infiltrate through the ruins. We try to get these awkward bits of wood to fall into the street, but without tools in the middle of tottering walls and under enemy fire, our men can only establish the uselessness of their efforts. After several fruitless attempts, the Reds succeed in setting fire to this hanging pyre. We haven't got a drop of water. Georges, the signaller, a placid, smiling, young Norman with plump cheeks, does his best in his quality as a former Parisian fireman, but soon he has to report that we must abandon all hope. If all goes well, we should be able to remain another hour, not more!

The Main Security Office had been decided upon as our next centre of resistance, several dozen metres away. While waiting, we continue the battle with the flames over our heads, while Georges and several others try desperately to slow down the fire's advance at the risk of being burnt alive. After alternatives of hope and anxiety, Georges, black as a charcoal burner, returns to report that there is not much time left; the ground floor will be engulfed in its turn and the hundreds of books ranged along the shelves will provide the flames magnificent nourishment. The ground floor fills with smoke and flames come from the ceiling. It is now impossible to reach Wilhemstrasse. Regretfully, we must leave. It is now 1800 hours.

The Main Security Office is in ruins, but its cellars opening unto the street still provide useful shelter. Our sentries take up their positions without any reaction from the Reds. In fact our move was conducted as discreetly as possible. Soon a violent infantry fight starts up on our right, a furious fusillade opening up and nourished by both sides. The Reds advance and are repulsed, advance again and are again repulsed. Finally they manage to gain a little ground in the neighbouring sector, but our front remains unaltered.

In a cellar serving as a shelter and rest place, and by the light of a candle, I award Iron Crosses to a certain number of our comrades. To be decorated at the front in the course of an impressive parade is everyone's dream, but tonight the pathos of this so simple ceremony with a few gathered round in this dark and narrow cellar during the last hours of a super-human battle is worth all the parades in the world. By the trembling light of this symbolic candle, whose flame celebrates the victory of light over the shadows and hope over death, the blackened, dull, emaciated faces, creased with fatigue and hunger, the faces tense or shining, with feverish, ardent eyes, take on an extraordinary aspect. 'In the name of the Führer ...'

The last night is relatively calm. A neighbouring company leaves on a mission on behalf of the Reichs Chancellery and we take over their sector. The





*Nordland's* command post has moved out of Stadtmitte U-Bahn Station and is now in the Reichs Chancellery itself. Dufour, sent there, reports that all is well. This evening they are celebrating the award of the Knight's Cross to Vaulot, who destroyed his seventh tank today, and our few comrades there – the commander kept back several at his disposal – are singing and drinking with their German comrades of the *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*. We haven't been forgotten, and Dufour and his group have brought us some chocolate and several bottles. The 1st May, a fateful day, has passed much more successfully than the Ukrainian predicted the other evening.

## 2 May

### **Captain Fenet concluded his account:**

Towards daybreak, our sentries report that we are again alone ahead of the lines. I check, it is true; there is no one to left or right of us. A little later a patrol reports that the front line is now back to the Air Ministry. We withdraw there during the course of the morning and make contact with the Luftwaffe troops occupying the building. We take up our new positions without any loss of time, but we have hardly done so when we see vehicles bearing white flags coming from the enemy lines. In them are German officers and Russians. There is talk of capitulation. Soon unarmed Russian soldiers come forward offering cigarettes, and some of the Luftwaffe soldiers start fraternising. Other Red soldiers arrive in detachments, but they come from within our lines.

The Luftwaffe commander tells me of his intention of surrendering when the Reds invite him to. 'Its over,' he adds, 'the capitulation has been signed.' But he is unable to provide me with any details. No, we cannot believe that it is all over, that's impossible! In any case, we cannot remain here to be taken stupidly! What's happening at the Reichs Chancellery? There at least we should learn something, and if there is a last square to be formed, we will be the ones to form it!

We quickly leave the ministry without responding to the Reds, men and women, that cordially invite us to hand over our arms. Avoiding the streets, we filter through the ruins as far as the U-Bahn and climb down through a ventilation shaft. There is no living soul at Stadtmitte Station, only two or three empty bags. We then come to the Kaiserhof Station, just behind the Reichs Chancellery. A ladder goes up to a ventilation grid at street level. I am the first to go up and look, my ears attuned to sounds of combat, but there is only the noise of klaxons and moving trucks. More bars, but at last I can see, with my hands clasping the ladder, my eyes take in the spectacle that my body rejects. As far as I can see are Russians, vehicle with the red star going in all directions,



not a single shot, the Reichs Chancellery walls are dumb, there is no one around, it is all over!

I go back down again without saying a word. The men gather round me with wide eyes. 'Nobody! The Russians are there, everywhere. The Führer is certainly dead.' They lower their heads in silence.

'Now, we have to get out of here. In my opinion the only solution is to try to get through to the west. We will use the U-Bahn tunnels as long as possible. Let's go! We will get out of this situation this time too! Does everyone agree?'

With our ears pricked we continue on our way. The ceiling has collapsed in several places, in other places rubble blocks the way and we clear a path through with our hands and bayonets. But at Potsdammer Platz a cruel discovery awaits us; from here on the U-Bahn lines are in the open.

It would be best to remain hidden underground and wait for nightfall. One of the tunnels opens under a railway bridge and is blocked with debris, offering a wonderful hiding place. We quickly split up into small groups and vanish one after another. However, some Volkssturm arrive at the same time with the same intention as ourselves. These poor old chaps are slow and noisy, attracting the attention of a Red patrol that enters several seconds later. 'Don't shoot! Don't shoot!' the first Volkssturm calls out in an anxious voice as they grab hold of him. The Reds carefully search the whole area and flush out our group one after another. We hold our breath as the Russians go past. Several times they stop right in front of us. Our hearts beat to breaking point. Pressed one against the other, we wait and cling stubbornly to our last hopes.

The end comes suddenly. Our protecting wall collapses under angry booting, the Russians surround us and comb through our pockets. The first things they take are our watches, and then our weapons. We are dragged outside, where we see drunken groups of the victors staggering around. A swaying Russian approaches us with angrily blinking eyes and threatening mouth. He grabs Roger Albert marching next to me and pushes him against a wall. A guard intervenes and pulls his prisoner back into the column. 'I thought I had had it!' whispers Roger Albert to me. At this moment the drunken Russian returns, seizing his victim again: 'SS! SS!' he cries, pulling out his pistol. A shot rings out and Roger Albert falls at my feet without a sound. Seeing that we are about to stop, our guards push us on shouting, and we continue on our way.

We come to the Reichs Chancellery, which is being ransacked, while hundreds and hundreds of tanks parade through the Tiergarten towards the



Brandenburg Gate, which still raises its mutilated profile like a last hope, a last act of defiance.

Rostaing and sixteen other French survivors were sleeping exhausted in the ruins of Potsdammer railway station at around midnight when they were awakened by a call to surrender or the station would be blown up.

**General Krukenberg concluded his account:**

Having crossed the Spree, I sent the two officers that lived locally off on reconnaissance, but neither of them returned, so towards 0300 hours on the morning of the 2nd May I made a reconnaissance myself accompanied by my French detachment. An attempt to go through the Charité Hospital failed because Professor Sauerbruch (the hospital director), in agreement with the Russian command, had declared it a neutral zone, so I tried to go via Chausseestrasse. I encountered elements of the *Nordland* with SS-General Ziegler, who had joined us with his companions. There were four or five holders of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross in our group, including the Frenchman Vaultot.

Meanwhile day was dawning and the Soviets, seeing our column, brought it under violent fire. We turned around with the hope of leaving via Gesundbrunnen towards Pankow and from there on to Wittenau.

Following Brunnenstrasse we were suddenly hit by well directed mortar fire at the level of Lortzingstrasse, apparently coming from the railway ring. We sought shelter in the courtyard of a building on the corner, where SS-General Ziegler was mortally wounded near me by explosions that wounded other members of our group. Soviet infantrymen that had infiltrated the quarter took us under fire in turn, obliging us to turn back towards the city.

At the level of Ziegelstrasse we saw the 'Tiger' tank I had placed at the disposal of the Chancellery the day before, burnt out and abandoned, with no trace of its crew. All the area, including the Weidendammer Bridge, was still clear of the enemy at 0900 hours that morning.

By 1500 hours all resistance had definitely ceased in Berlin. That evening the German armies in Italy and Austria also capitulated.

Having succeeded in hiding myself away with some friends in Dahlem for several days, I eventually surrendered to the Soviet authorities in Berlin-Steglitz.



## SS-Major-General Krukenberg recalled:

During the night of Monday 23rd to Tuesday 24th April 1945 at about 0400 hours in the morning I received two telephone calls coming respectively from the Waffen-SS Personnel Office near Fürstenberg and Headquarters Army Group *Weichsel* near Prenzlau, ordering me on behalf of the OKW to go quickly to Berlin and take over command of the 11th SS Panzer Division *Nordland* as a replacement for General Ziegler, who had been relieved on health grounds.

As soon as I arrived in Berlin I was to present myself to General Krebs, the Army Chief of Staff, and to SS-General Fegelein, the Waffen-SS liaison officer, both in the Chancellery.

Because of previous experience, I asked authority to bring with me part of my normal staff and an accompanying detachment of about 90 men. These two requests were agreed by Army Group who laid down the route via Oranienburg and Frohnau as the best way, being still free of the enemy.

I set up the accompanying detachment with volunteers, preferably those with anti-tank experience and gave command of it to Captain Fenet, who had been decorated with the EK I [Iron Cross First Class] and promoted for his conduct in Pomerania. The place and time of departure of the column, two buses and three trucks, was fixed by me for 0830 hours on the 24th April at the southern exit of Alt Steglitz.

This was the same time that Marshal Rokossovsky's army group (2nd Byelorussian Front) launched a new and powerful attack, gaining a foothold on the left bank of the Oder held by Army Group *Weichsel*, to which the Division belonged, pressing a new and last engagement for the *Charlemagne*. Berlin was three-quarters surrounded by the Russian army groups of Zhukov and Koniev, and its impending complete investment boded no delay.

At 0030 hours on the 24th April, I received the order by telegram to form an assault battalion with the remains of the Division and to direct this unit urgently upon Berlin, where I was to present myself at the Chancellery.

This Storm Battalion was formed from three companies of Battalion 57 (plus one from Battalion 58) and reinforced by the divisional combat school (*Compagnie d'Honneur*). The majority of the divisional headquarters also left with the battalion. To counter a lack of heavy weapons, the battalion was mainly equipped with automatic weapons (MG-42 or the assault rifle MP-44) as well as individual anti-tank weapons (*Panzerfausts*). In all probability, the remainder of the battalion would follow next day in second echelon if one could still get through.



The structure of the Storm Battalion was as follows:

Capt Fenet

Comd:

Adj: SS-Lt von Wallenrodt

001: O/Cdt Frantz

002: O/Cdt Deuraux

IVb: Lt Dr Herpe

IVd: 2/Lt Abbé Verney

Combat School: SS-Lt Weber

1 Coy/Bn 57: 2/Lt Labourdette

2 Coy/Bn 57: Lt Michel

3 Coy/Bn 57: Lt Fatin

4 Coy/Bn 57: Ssgt Ollivier

6 Coy/Bn 58: Sgt-Maj Rostaing

Apart from this, I took with me my adjutant, liaison officer, chief medical officer, headquarters commander and several other officers.

At 0500 hours that morning the battalion, about 500 strong, left Carpin by truck for the rendezvous at the southern exit of Neustrelitz.

On its way the column passed an increasing number of vehicles and trucks, whose occupants said that Soviet tanks had been seen not far from Oranienburg. Once could not expect to enter Berlin via Frohnau for much longer. I knew Berlin and its surroundings well from civilian life. I therefore left the north-south route near Löwenberg to head for Neuruppin, reaching the Berlin-Hamburg highway near Friesack. The tracks and roads were crowded with columns of all kinds coming from Berlin.

After coming under air attack at Nauen, we then came under enemy artillery fire near Wustermark. Quitting the main road, we took a lesser road leading to Ketzin. After some six kilometres, we established that isolated enemy groups completing the encirclement of Berlin, and advancing with extreme caution, some coming from the southwest from the direction of Paretz, others from the northeast from the direction of Priort (south of Wustermark), were about to meet up with each other at the exact spot where we were!





We still had to cross the canal near the farms of Falkenrehde, just behind us on the road to Marquardt. If we didn't, the two arrowheads would join up and lose the trap behind us.

As the *Charlemagne* column was about to cross the heavy sandstone bridge, three Vokssturm men mistook us for the enemy and blew the bridge. The vehicles could go no farther and would have to turn back. They managed to reach Neustrelitz, but several trucks were lost on the way and three of them returned to Carpin with 90 men, Lieutenants Fatin and Herpe, and Second-Lieutenant Verney.

At 1500 hours on the 24th April, the column that had crossed the canal, now about 300 strong, carried on, having carried across their baggage, mainly ammunition, and reached Pichelsdorf via Marquardt, Glienicke and Gatow without encountering any of the Berlin defence apart from three Hitler Youth armed with Panzerfausts and patrolling on their bicycles. The big bridges across the Havel on the strategic Berlin-Spandau road were barricaded but unguarded!

After a long and fatiguing march on foot of over 20 kilometres, the detachment reached the vicinity of the Reichs Sports Field and camped in the Grunewald Forest not far from the Pichelsdorf Bridge (Freybrücke), which the Soviet artillery was trying to hit. The exhausted men took a rest.

#### **Captain Henri Fenet described the situation:**

We reached Berlin in the depth of night, very late, coming in from the west by the last route, where the noose was slowly tightening. The crackling of machine-gun fire now mixed in with the rumbling of artillery from quite close to us. We had been marching for hours, ever since a bridge had been blown from under our feet and made us abandon our trucks. We continued, forcing the pace as the sounds of battle drew closer. Harassed, we marched like automatons, our muscles taunt with the effects of fatigue that we could feel climbing up our legs. We marched on, obsessed by the worry about arriving soon in the encircled capital, of not letting our way be barred from our last battle, all our being, all our strength going towards the goal that attracted us so powerfully: Berlin!

At last we reached it, the last ones were through. Now, stretched out under the pines of the Grunewald we thought of nothing else but sleep, but the din of the Red artillery searching for the Pichelsdorf Bridge (Freybrücke) close by kept us awake.



A violent explosion interrupted the scene. A Red aircraft had come to bring us back to the present. Its bomb landed not far from the bridge and the echo resonated for a long time in the deep valley, but soon silence and calm returned to the black night and we were able to sleep.

**Krukenberg continued:**

Having confiscated an abandoned vehicle, I left shortly after midnight with SS-Captain Pachur for the Chancellery, where I arrived at about 0030 hours on the 25th April. We waited about three hours in the communications room, from where I was able to inform Army Group *Weichsel* of my arrival.

At about 0330 hours I was introduced to General Krebs, who told me straight-forwardly: 'During these last 48 hours we have ordered numerous officers via the OKW, as well as units outside Berlin, to come immediately to reinforce the defence. You are the first to arrive!'

Generals Krebs and Burgdorf ordered me to report that morning to General of Artillery Weidling, commanding the LVIth Panzer Corps and at the same time 'Commander of the Berlin Defence Area', whose command post was in the offices of the IIIrd Military Region on the Hohenzollern-damm. SS-Lieutenant-General Fegelein could not be found for the moment.

**Fenet continued:**

When we awoke it was full daylight. The general returned from the Chancellery with a thoughtful expression. Briefly he brought us up to date with the situation and gave us his orders. The encirclement of Berlin had been completed during the night and until now the Russian thrust had been contained in the suburbs, except at Neukölln in the southeast, where there had been some deep penetrations, which had not unduly disturbed the command. It was there, apparently, that we would be engaged.

The general had just been given command of the 11th SS-Volunteer Panzergrenadier Division *Nordland*, to which the French battalion was to be attached as an autonomous unit. The *Nordland* comprised Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes, but was much reduced in strength from the fighting in the winter and early spring, being down to 1,500 effectives.

As the men impatiently watched the Hitler Youth patrols circulating in the Grunewald Forest, our marching orders arrived and were received with pleasure. Our trucks rolled into the city. The loud rumblings of battle came from



all around, the furious howling of shells smashing down haphazardly on all parts.

But in this carnival of death, Berlin still maintained an impressive calm. People were walking in the streets as normal, without haste, without panic, functioning normally, content to do so, but with an almost religious gravity.

### **Krukenberg resumed:**

I returned to the Reichs Sport Field at about 0500 hours, then left for the Hohenzollerndamm. Still no sight of the defence forces!

I was received by the chief of staff, Colonel von Dufving, at the command post of the LVIth Panzer Corps, then General Weidling.

The encirclement of the town was completed that night, but the Russians were being held in the suburbs, except in the southeast at Neukölln, where the situation was confused. It was there that the Division *Nordland* was engaged.

The *Charlemagne* battalion now consisted of the following:

SS-Lt Weber

Combat School:

1st Coy:	2/Lt Labourdette
2nd Coy:	Lt Michel
3rd Coy:	Sgt-Maj Rostaing
4th Coy:	Ssgt Ollivier (80 men)

During the afternoon the battalion embarked in trucks in the Grunewald and arrived in Neukölln singing, to the applause of the Berliners.

Once in Berlin the battalion was divided into eight-man sections, each commanded by an energetic NCO and destined to fight in isolation. Two or three of these sections were lead in action by the officers present – Fenet, Weber, etc., but, with these derisory numbers, it was no longer a matter of companies.

Far from being confident, General Weidling, nominated 'Battle Commandant of Berlin' 48 hours beforehand, despite his plans for an active defence, had no more than his own armoured corps, badly mauled in the recent fighting, and his nucleus, the Panzer Division *Müncheberg*, as well as several units such as the 11th SS-Panzer Grenadier Division *Nordland*, the Chancellery guards



and the Volkssturm, Hitler Youth and several alarm units put together by different organisations, badly trained and inapt in combat.

The southeast of Berlin formed Defence Sector 'C' and had been allocated to the SS-Division *Nordland* by Corps, but its commander, SS-Major-General Ziegler, despite an irreproachable military career, could no longer maintain the cohesion of his scattered troops in the city. He had requested his relief and I had been summoned to Berlin to replace him.

The command post of the *Nordland*, with which all telephone communication had been broken, was situated (at the Pneumology (Lung) Centre opposite the park) on the Hasenheide road between the districts of Kreuzberg and Neukölln. I soon found my way there and found the divisional command post completely disorganised after having been hit by a heavy calibre bomb from a Soviet aircraft.

General Ziegler was waiting to be relieved of his command, and forecast that I would not be able to hold on for more than 48 hours. The defence of Berlin was an impossible task and that was why they were looking for scapegoats in the high places. He had no more than 70 men in the front line. The remainder of the over exhausted troops were returning of their own accord, but his two grenadier regiments, with the exception of the headquarters, could only be considered at most as strong companies or weak battalions.

At noon on the 25th April, SS-Major-General Ziegler handed over the command to me and left for the Chancellery, where I saw him again on the evening of the 1st May.

I sent my liaison officer, SS-Second-Lieutenant Patzak, to get my detachment on alert at the Reichs Sports Field in the *Nordland's* trucks.

Shortly after Ziegler's departure, two or three armoured personnel carriers arrived from the front filled with wounded, looking for a hospital. Krukenberg's French escorting personnel waiting outside the bunker tried to stop them, and when they failed to stop, one of the Frenchmen opened fire. The co-driver of the leading armoured personnel carrier returned the fire with his machine gun, presumably taking the unknown Frenchmen to be Seydlitz-Troops, wounding three or four of them.

The Division Krukenberg had taken over consisted of only about 1,500 men and 6 self-propelled guns, the divisional artillery having already been deployed in the Tiergarten in the central Corps pool, while the supply and other support elements were located in the Pichelsdorf area.



One of the first orders issued by Krukenberg, who found the organisation so lax, was to restrict movement of subordinate units without prior application for approval in writing. This order, however, only showed his lack of understanding of the current situation on the ground and could not be followed.

#### **Krukenberg continued:**

While my adjutant, SS-Captain Pachur reorganised the command post, I set off forward on foot, encountering only Volkssturm, whose chief, a Kreisleiter, had set up his command post at Hermannplatz in a big building on the corner of Hasenheide and the Kottbusser Damm (the Karstadt Department Store), from the first floor of which he had an overall view.

According to him, the Soviets coming from the east had occupied Treptow District the day before. Previously he had posted some weak outposts as far as the Urbandamm and at Sonnenallee, but he could not count on them putting up a resistance, as they only had a few machine guns and very little ammunition. To his left he had public telephone communication with the Görlitzer Railway Station sector, whose chief, Reichsleiter Hilgenfeld, had fallen two hours previously.

After a restful night, despite an aerial bombardment close to Hasenheide, Fenets's battalion set off at daybreak on the 26th April, for Neukölln town hall, where they were supposed to assist with a counterattack by the *Nordland* at 0500 hours. In fact the attack, supported by several tanks and self-propelled guns did not start until 0600 hours.

Right at the outset, while Ssgt Ollivier, commanding the 4th Company, which had been given a support task, was giving orders to his section leaders gathered around him, the company was taken by surprise by a Russian anti-tank gun. Seventeen men were killed with one blow and the numerous wounded including Ollivier and SS-WO II Fieselbrand, a section commander. officer-cadet Protopopoff assumed command of the 4th Company while the wounded were evacuated.

#### **Captain Fenet gave his account of the action:**

We held an arms inspection not far from Hasenheide Park. At 0500 hours next day we were to go into the attack with other *Nordland* units and chase the Reds out of Neukölln. As night fell, we set up sentry posts at the crossroads. The night was strangely calm as we went about the dark and deserted streets, the only sound being the crunching of glass shards under our boots. The Neukölln Canal (Neuköllner Schiffahrtskanal) gave us some anxiety, but that too was calm





with its bridges, quays and sleeping black water. A humming sound comes through the air. Aircraft! The district was shaken for hours by the uninterrupted din of explosions that made the ground tremble and cracked the walls. Would the Reds use this deluge as cover for a night attack? Our sentries were alerted, but the Reds still did not budge that night, and after the crash of the last bombs, silence fell once more.

The companies assembled for the attack before daybreak and the columns set off in silence towards the town hall, from where the attack was to begin. The tanks were already there. On the corner of the street, an enormous *Königstiger*, massive on its wide tracks, extended its interminable 88mm gun, and there were some *Panthers* a bit further back with their fine silhouettes, then the *Sturmgeschütze*, assault guns with squat 70mm barrels. Their crews were quietly awaiting the departure time, a little as if they were going for a drive. We discussed the plan of attack down to minute detail. The grenadiers would advance alongside the armour, clearing the buildings and side-streets, and covering the tanks, which in turn would provide covering fire.

0500 hours. Nothing moves. The divisional attack is still not ready. 0530 hours, still nothing. Usually we do not pay much attention to such annoyances, but today this worries us. Finally, a little before 0600 hours, the order to set off arrives. The infantry advance well spaced out, followed by the tanks. The Reds fail to react for a few moments, but then their old Maxim machine guns open up with their slow and steady rhythm, followed by the anti-tank guns, which salute us with their angry barks. Our men advance as if on exercise, bounding from door to door along the walls, jumping or scrambling over the ruins, dodging the Red snipers firing from above. The tanks behind us spit fire and flames, their intervention visibly disquieting the opposition, who turn to the defensive. Their infantry only reveal themselves as apparently isolated snipers and leave the heavy arms, machine guns, anti-tank guns and mortars to hose us down. However, the enemy's violent fire does not prevent the regular advance of the grenadiers, who continue to bound forward nimbly and quickly.

We suffer a severe blow, however. A reserve section is about to negotiate a crossroads near the town hall, believing itself under cover, imprudently bunched, when a salvo of anti-tank gun shells hit the street corner with terrible precision, riddling the unfortunate men, smashing them to the pavement or against the surrounding walls. Broken hearted, I counted 15 bodies scattered on the roadway.

Meanwhile, the volunteers continued to advance, despite strong Soviet resistance. It was now necessary to clear building after building with grenades and bayonets. All along the streets leading to the town hall one could see men



reappear as they moved in bounds, arriving in bursts at the command post to refill their haversacks and pockets with ammunition, and leaving again with the same agility under the admiring eyes of the Berliners, who watched the combative ardour of the French with admiration. In practically every building one saw old men and women emerging from their cellars to find out what was happening and to see for themselves. We told them that the aim of our attack that morning was to clear the enemy out of Neukölln. 'May you succeed', they told us, hoping that the Reds would get to them. Often they came up to us with a cup of coffee or a glass of water in their hands. 'Drink up; you must be thirsty!' Others insisted that we spend a few minutes with them in their cellars to share a meal prepared from the last of their rations. All this was very kind and very moving, but we really had to get on with the job.

However, as our men advanced, liaison with units on either side became precarious. On the right and left the situation appeared quite confused, and already there was a threat to our flanks as we reduced the enemy wedge in our lines, and we had to regain contact with the units to the left and right that were still preventing the wedge from expanding. But it seemed that there was no one there but Russians. Then an order arrived from Division: 'If the attack has not started, stop and await new orders. If not, do your best!'

What did it mean? What was happening? SS-Lieutenant Joachim von Wallenrodt, the adjutant, immediately set off for Division and returned much later with the required orders. It was bad. We were the only unit to have attacked. That morning, the 26th April, at the same time as we set off from the town hall, the Reds had unleashed the floodgates of their formidable forces on Berlin. Already the capital's defensive belt was beginning to crack a little everywhere.

'Just our luck!' I said to von Wallenrodt, 'we have just taken half a district from Ivan, and now we have to abandon it, just like Heinrichswalde two months ago! Three hours after our attack we had to quit because there was no longer any front behind or alongside us. It was infuriating!'

'What shall we do, Captain?' asked von Wallenrodt phlegmatically.

'Assuredly we stay here. Should the situation stabilise itself on the flanks, we can hold on to what we have won, and if it gets worse, we shall see. For the moment we remain, and won't let ourselves be surrounded.'

We now formed a salient within the Russian lines and progressively I had to reduce the numbers at the head in order to reinforce the flanks. The town hall became the centre of our defence and we concentrated most our forces there. We had already received reinforcement in the form of a *Bann* of Hitler Youth, several



hundred boys of between fourteen and sixteen years of age, who charged with a magnificent spirit, blind and deaf to danger, uncaringly throwing themselves at the enemy, strong in their juvenile inexperience! Moreover, these youngsters fought like old soldiers! On preceding days we had seen them leaving in commandos into the suburbs to neutralise the advancing tanks, today we find them again in the street fighting alongside us, the most savage, the hardest, most murderous possible. They go ahead with their *Panzerfausts*, with rifles often taller than themselves, as naturally as if they were marching with a brass band and drums, unconcerned about their losses however numerous, and clearly aiming to perform as well as their elders.

Since morning the Reds have suffered heavy losses. Tanks and grenadiers have destroyed about 30 tanks, while the Red infantry, which has been reinforced by the hour, has left numerous dead and wounded on the ground, and several anti-tank guns have been knocked out. The fighting continues relentlessly.

The battalion runners tore along through the ruins, across streets swept by blasts and explosions to maintain contact with the attacking companies. Their leader, Corporal Millet, 20 years old, naturally took on the more important and more dangerous tasks. More than once since this morning we thought that we would never see him again, but always he returned, cool and calm: 'Mission accomplished.' During the afternoon we made a tour of all the units then returned to the town hall, on which the Reds seem to want to make a big effort by taking us in the flank.

At the moment that we enter the street to re-enter the town hall there is an explosion. Millet doubled up and fell face down, a last tremor and then he lay still. The enemy barrage continued to sweep the street and I felt a sharp pain in my left foot. I found myself without knowing how in the entrance to the town hall, from where I was taken inside. The barrage continued to fall outside. There was no time to lose, the Reds were much closer than we had thought. They were behind us, perhaps 50 metres from the town hall. Immediately, I had this dangerous sector swept clean, hobbling and cursing, because I now needed a stick and an assistant to walk. This is a fine time to get a bullet through the foot!

After some furious fighting, man to man with bayonet duels, throwing grenades from door to door and window to window, the Reds who had tried to take us in the rear were wiped out or fled. But, following the check of this attempt, they now tried to launch a frontal attack, and this time they spared neither their fire nor their men. We had no intention of letting them get away with this. Our men and the Hitler Youth installed in the town hall fought like devils, taking advantage of a moment when the Reds seemed to hesitate and



made a sortie in strength that dislocated their move completely and enabled us to clear the area.

Most of this fighting took place inside blocks of buildings, but now the tanks joined in, and T-34s arrived head to tail. Our *Panzerfausts* destroyed one or two, but the others continued on their way. Alerted, the *Königstiger* set up an ambush in a side-street and waited. Not far from it, I followed the sound of the Red tanks with my ears; the noise of the tank tracks got nearer, and I could hear their engines. They were quite close. The long 88mm barrel of the *Königstiger* lowered slowly, the front of the first T-34 appears, then its turret. There was a dry, violent explosion and flames and smoke surged out of the muzzle brake of the 88mm gun, which recoiled sharply, leaving the T-34 neatly immobilised. Our men covered the hatch with their rifles, but it didn't open. With a direct hit on the turret, the T-34 was dead, completely dead.

Millet was still there, stretched out on the pavement in his camouflage tunic of brown and green dots, his blond hair dirty with dust, his red face already dulled in death. The barrage had caught him in the side and he had been killed instantly. His comrades carried his body into shelter.

Roger, 19, a big devil with black hair, a cold aspect and a fanatical soul, took his place. He enlisted at the age of 17, and to the officer who said to him a little mockingly: 'Our kind of life is much too hard for the French,' he replied tit for tat: 'Not for everyone, and that is precisely why I am enlisting!'

He has already taken part in two campaigns without getting a scratch, but the trip to Berlin started off badly for him. The day before yesterday when the bridge was blown up in front of us, he was blown into the canal below. Completely blinded, his eyes full of dirt, he had only recovered his sight the day before.

As the afternoon progressed, our situation at the town hall became more critical. With the front line yielded back on both sides, we no longer had any neighbours and there did not seem to be much behind us. We could only hold our position through the extraordinary dynamism of our men. Cap, the little Flemish sergeant, had grabbed a machine gun and was holding a street on his own. At a rate of 1,200 rounds a minute, he was hosing down anything that moved in front of him with a precision and rapid reflex of action that visibly disconcerts the Reds. From time to time he made a rapid change of position, going behind another bit of wall, another heap of rubble, and resumed harassing the assailants. Fink, who was acting as my crutch, requisitioned a Hitler Youth in passing for this role, which was too placid for his taste, and went to rejoin Cap: 'Let me take over for a bit, you're going to kill yourself!' Relieving each other



from time to time, they held the street until the evening without the Reds being able to advance a metre.

For five hours we had been completely alone in front of the lines. The few tanks that still had fuel and ammunition remained with us, while the others pulled back. Cut off from the Division, we decided to stay in the town hall as long as a line of retreat remained to our lines. The Reds could cut off our retreat with 50 men, but no doubt they would not dream of it and tried desperately to attack us from the front or sides with their tanks supported by several hundred men. A wasted effort; the tanks burst into flames or had to turn back, and the infantry bit the dust as soon as they dared expose themselves. There was now an infernal din, the shelling being nourished from one place or another and we could no longer distinguish between it increasing or dwindling. At each street corner one was regularly shaken by an explosion, covered in dust, eardrums aching. If one was lucky, it was just one of our hidden tanks that had just fired, but it was more likely to be a volley from the Ivans opposite.

Towards 1900 hours the battalion runners reported that Red tanks had reached Hermannplatz, 900 metres behind us. Only two streets remained free and, no doubt, not for much longer. This time we had to leave, for once Hermannplatz was blocked, there would be no way out. I used a pause in the fighting to regroup the Hitler Youth and SS, and we pulled back with the tanks without the Reds trying to stop us. We reached Hermannplatz a little later without difficulty and found the defence there being hastily organised behind barricades of paving stones. We were just in time: the T-34s were keeping a respectful distance of several hundred yards and, several minutes after our arrival, all the arteries leading from the square to the east were in enemy hands.

The assault guns stayed close to us and started a veritable massacre of Russian tanks as they tried to encroach on the square. A bull's eye and the dusk was illuminated with the light of all these tanks in flames, exposing one after another to a great din. The battle continued well into the night, but the Red infantry did not show themselves.

At about midnight the order came for us to withdraw. On the way we were rejoined by Labourdette and his No. 1 Company, which had remained at the disposal of the Division all day and had had to intervene to parry enemy infiltrations when the front gave way. Labourdette told me that he had just been requisitioned by the Defence Sector commander, whom he does not come under, to seal a new breach. That was none of my business, but after the long day we have just been through, I was relying on No. 1 Company, the only fresh unit remaining in the battalion, to make up my losses. I explained this to the Defence Sector commander, requesting he should at least let the last survivors of the





French Division fight on together! I used the occasion to tell him of my surprise to find the defence organised in such a desultory fashion.

Naively, I thought that the belt defence of Berlin would be formed from regular units organised like ourselves and I could not understand how the front had cracked so quickly, because in our sector we had held and would have continued holding much longer had it not been for the total absence of neighbours having allowed the Reds to encircle us. It was the turn of the person with whom I was talking to be astonished at my astonishment. If all the Berlin front was as well off for troops as our sector, we would not now be behind Hermannplatz! In fact, of properly constituted units, there were only the remains of General Weidling's armoured corps and some SS units, which included our battalion, the *Nordland* Division and some *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* troops at the Reichs Chancellery, not amounting to more than 2–3,000 men when the battle began! Most of the troops were in hastily-formed ad hoc units of Hitler Youth, Volkssturm and over-age policemen. All were of good will, many, especially the Hitler Youth, were fighting magnificently, but this was not enough. Cadres were lacking, there was no artillery, hardly any tanks, fuel and ammunition was strictly rationed.

Meanwhile the situation was becoming catastrophic in our sector and, in view of the urgency, I agreed for No. 1 Company to take part in a limited operation while the rest of the battalion took several hours' rest.

Before leaving, I recommended to Labourdette that he should not let himself become involved and to return at all costs at the agreed time. 'You can count on me,' he replied, but in hearing him I sensed a painful presentiment. I took him by the shoulder: 'You must return with the lads, you must return yourself, do you understand?'

There was a brief silence. 'Don't worry, I'll be back,' he said in a distant voice and a little hesitantly, as if the words were refusing to come out.

'Right, see you soon!'

'See you soon, Captain.'

We shook hands and he disappeared into the night with his men. I watched his silhouette fade with a pang of anguish. His attitude disturbed me. It was that of a man going into battle knowing that he would not return. But no, this was ridiculous. I shrugged my shoulders, furious with myself for letting myself think that way. My nerves were on edge, no doubt, and the fault lay with the ridiculous wound which made me walk with crutches. No, Labourdette would return. That



winter he had magnificently won under fire the insignia of a Second-Lieutenant, for which the officer-cadet school had considered him too timid, having decided last autumn to go through the course once more. Timid, he certainly had been, but since Pomerania that was over. Prolonged contact with the Reds had given him confidence.

Roger interrupted my thoughts by bringing me a chair and urging me to rest. 'Not now, Roger!' Right now I had to find somewhere for my men to sleep for a few hours. Von Wallenrodt, who had gone off to search, had found room in the Thomas Keller opposite the Anhalter Railway Station. He would lead the battalion there and we were to meet later in the morning at the Divisional command post, which I wanted to get back to straight away. Von Wallenrodt set off with the men, while Officer-Cadet Douroux and myself vainly searched for a vehicle to take us into the city centre. The command post of one of the *Nordland* regiments was quite close, and there we learned that there was not a drop of petrol available at the moment, and also that the general was about to move again, but no one knew where. While waiting, we were invited to use the time to sleep in the shelter, which was also serving as a dressing station.

SS-Major-General Krukenberg noted that since the morning, the tanks and grenadiers had destroyed thirty enemy tanks and several anti-tank guns, apart from inflicting heavy casualties on the Russian infantry. His account continued:

Towards the end of the morning of the 26th, Staff-Sergeant Ollivier left the ambulance near the Tiergarten and set off to find the Fenet Battalion to resume command of the 4th Company, when he came face to face with SS-Captain Heller, an instructor at the Breslau Infantry Gun School, where he had done a course with the 10th Company of the 57th Battalion. He was immediately commandeered to command a section of two 150mm infantry guns served by recruits of the SS-Division *Das Reich*, two SS-corporals performing the combined roles of gun team leaders and aimers. With great difficulty, these two guns were finally deployed on an avenue controlling an important crossroads 500 metres away. The first tank appeared at the end of a quarter of an hour and was destroyed by a shot to the rear, and eight others received the same fate. But it was impossible to camouflage and difficult to redeploy, and a volley from Stalin Organs wiped out the first gun with its truck and team. Redeployed in a small parallel street, the second gun succeeded in expending all its ammunition.

Having remained until 1700 hours in a laundry used as a command post by the Heller section, Staff-Sergeant Ollivier suddenly saw SS-Lieutenant von Wallenrodt of the division enter, who then took him back to the Fenet Battalion near the Opera, where he resumed command of the 4th Company, now reduced to 20 men under officer-cadet Protopopoff. During the course of the 27th, the



latter had succeeded in shooting down a Russian reconnaissance aircraft with a machine gun. There were several encounters with Russian patrols without loss.

The damage caused by the aerial bombing was so serious that it was impossible to command from this position. I therefore asked and obtained permission from Corps, which had meanwhile moved from the Hohenzollerndamm to Bendlerstrasse, to transfer my command post to Gneisenau Police Barracks, also requesting being absolved from responsibility for Sector 'C' and that I be allocated a more central zone for the *Nordland*. At the same time I also signalled the presence of two police battalions in the barracks, perfectly equipped and rested, and completely forgotten about, that were quite capable of holding the sector in place of the *Nordland*, which was now in the need of a complete overhaul. The *Nordland* was assigned to the Gendarmenmarkt area and I provisionally selected the cellars of the Opera house for my command post.

