

BRITISH FREE CORPS IN WAFFEN SS

MYTH AND HISTORIC REALITY

A number of books and online publications have referred to a British unit in the Waffen-SS that included several Australians. Until relatively recently, some accounts even claimed or speculated that members of this unit took part in the defense of Berlin in April–May 1945. The most comprehensive study, based on documents declassified during the 1980s and 1990s, was published in Adrian Weale's *Renegades: Hitler's Englishmen* (1994). The following account is based primarily on that work. It should be noted that this story does not concern the separate group of British collaborators who participated in Nazi propaganda broadcasts directed at Great Britain.

The unit began to take shape during the second half of 1943, when Germany's strategic and military situation had deteriorated significantly. Volunteer prisoners of war from Great Britain and the British Dominions became its principal source of recruits. The first commander of the unit was SS-Hauptsturmführer Hans Werner Roepke, a German officer fluent in English.

The British Free Corps (BFC) was officially established on 1 January 1944. During the remaining fifteen months of the war, a total of only thirty-nine men served in its ranks. Initially, the Corps consisted of six members: Thomas Cooper, Francis MacLardy, Roy Courlander, Edward Martin, Alfred Minchin, and John Wilson. These men became known as the "Big Six" because they formed the hard-core pro-Nazi nucleus responsible for recruiting additional volunteers.

Thomas Cooper, the son of an English father and a German mother, had unsuccessfully applied to join the Police College, the Royal Navy, and the Royal Air Force before the war, being rejected because of his German ancestry. Disillusioned, he joined the British Union of Fascists (BUF). In 1939 he travelled to Germany with his mother, where the outbreak of war left him facing a difficult choice: internment as a British citizen or service in the German armed forces. He chose the latter and was later assigned to units of the SS Totenkopf Division. In 1941 he served in occupied Poland and later boasted of participating in the murder of Poles and Jews. He subsequently fought on the Eastern Front, where he was wounded.

Francis MacLardy, a former pharmacist from Liverpool and a member of the BUF, was captured in Belgium in 1940. After suffering a series of illnesses, he joined the British Free Corps in 1943, believing that he would not survive another winter in the prisoner-of-war camp in Poland (where he was then being held).

Roy Courlander, the stepson of a Lithuanian Jew and an English mother, was born in London, served in the New Zealand Army, and was captured in Greece in 1941. Pretending to be a White Russian émigré, he became known for his strongly anti-Soviet views. Before joining the Corps, he had taken part in German propaganda broadcasts aimed at Britain.

Little is known about the background of the Canadian Edward Martin, who was captured following the failed Dieppe Raid. Alfred Minchin, a merchant seaman aboard the *SS Empire Range*, was captured after his ship was sunk while en route to Murmansk. He later claimed that he had joined the British Free Corps because he believed it would serve solely as a propaganda organisation. Former Sergeant John Wilson was probably pressured into joining the Corps rather than volunteering willingly.

By February 1944, the Corps numbered eight "Free Britons," although its membership remained highly unstable, with men constantly joining and leaving. Kenneth Berry, a former Royal Navy boy seaman who had been captured in 1940 at only fourteen years of age, also became a member. In March, however, Edward Martin withdrew from the Corps and returned to his prisoner-of-war camp.

Several more recruits soon followed, including Robert Heighes, Robert Lane, Norman Rose, an Australian named Wood, and Thomas Freeman. After the war, Freeman was completely acquitted

after successfully demonstrating that his true objective had been to undermine the organisation from within and eventually escape. Although he had once belonged to the BUF and shared its anti-Communist and anti-Semitic beliefs, during his time in the Corps he actively spread anti-Nazi views among his comrades and encouraged them to escape. While assisting in recruitment, he deliberately selected men whom he believed would contribute nothing but confusion to the project. As Freeman later told British investigators, they "would bring only chaos." Together with Wilson, he recruited the Australians Chipchase and Albert Stokes, as well as Sergeant Theo Ellsmore, a Belgian who posed as a South African. Chipchase remained in the Corps for only a few days before returning to the prisoner-of-war camp. Stokes, a friend of Freeman, initially intended to help sabotage the organisation from within.

During the spring of 1944, members of the British Free Corps visited prisoner-of-war camps to recruit additional volunteers. During this period William How, a former lance corporal in the Military Police, and Ernest Nichols, formerly employed as an army petrol storekeeper, joined the Corps. In May and June they were followed by the merchant seamen Herbert Rowlands and Roland Barker, an Australian.

Ironically, Rowlands had fought in Spain with the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War before deserting and later joining the British Union of Fascists. Barker was later described by Cooper as a man of very limited intelligence who had joined the Corps mainly because he expected better food, alcohol, and access to women.

John Leister and Eric Pleasants joined in June. Pleasants had previously belonged to the BUF and had refused military service before the war on the grounds of his pacifist beliefs. Leister was born in London to a German family and studied in Germany during 1935–1936. In 1940 both men were performing alternative civilian service on one of the Channel Islands when the islands were occupied by German forces. They looted several houses abandoned by refugees and later attempted to escape to Britain by motorboat. Captured by the Germans, they spent six months in a prison in France before eventually being transferred to a prisoner-of-war camp for merchant seamen. Like several others, they joined the British Free Corps in the hope of obtaining better food, alcohol, and access to women.

Among the recruits of the spring and summer of 1944 were Harry Dean Bachelor, a former Royal Engineers sapper; Hugh Cowie, who had previously made several escape attempts and joined the Corps to avoid court-martial for possessing an illegal radio receiver; Roy Fatcher, who enlisted out of fear of being court-martialled for relationships with German women; Frank Maton, a former BUF member who had later served as a corporal in British Commando units before participating in German propaganda broadcasts; and Tom Perkins, a former lance corporal in the Military Police. Of these men, only Maton appears to have been genuinely committed to Nazi ideology. By June 1944, the Corps had reached its maximum strength of twenty-seven members.

At this point, Freeman and Ellsmore drafted a petition requesting that the volunteers be returned to their prisoner-of-war camps. Fourteen men signed the document. The German authorities treated the petition as an act of mutiny and transferred the signatories to the Stutthof isolation camp. Freeman escaped from the camp in November 1944 and eventually reached Soviet lines. He was subsequently repatriated to Britain in March 1945.

Relations within the Corps were often strained. Bitter arguments and even fistfights between the members of the "Big Six" and the rest of the volunteers were common. Excessive drinking also became a serious disciplinary problem throughout the unit.

Three of the four Britons who joined the Corps in August did so under coercion or blackmail. Frederick Croft, a former artilleryman, agreed to enlist after making five unsuccessful escape attempts and enduring a prolonged period of solitary confinement, from which he believed he had little chance of being released. Edward Jackson likewise faced a choice between court-martial for an affair with a German woman and joining the British Free Corps. The Scotsman Charlie Munns found himself in a similar predicament. Because his German girlfriend was pregnant, he feared that he might even face execution. The fourth recruit, Lieutenant William Shearer, entered the Corps directly

from a psychiatric hospital. Suffering from schizophrenia, he remained with the BFC for only a few weeks before being returned to hospital.

The Allied landings in Normandy had a profoundly negative effect on the morale of the "Free Britons." Even members of the "Big Six" began discussing the need to return to Britain before news of their collaboration reached home. In August, Tom Perkins was expelled from the Corps and sent to an SS penal camp after stealing a pistol, which he subsequently sold to a foreign labourer. During the same month, Pleasants, Leister, How, Rose, Fatcher, Rowlands, and Croft were transferred to an SS penal unit near Schwerin, where they were assigned to a road construction gang. Robert Lane was simply returned to his prisoner-of-war camp. These developments reduced the strength of the Corps by almost one-third.

By September 1944, even the members of the "Big Six" had grown weary of their continual conflicts with the rest of the "Free Britons." Francis MacLardy, the Corps' most committed Nazi, left the unit to join an SS medical detachment. Roy Courlander and Frank Maton simply boarded a train transporting a Flemish SS battalion toward Brussels and made their way to the front. On 4 September 1944, they surrendered voluntarily to British forces.

Nevertheless, at the end of September two more men joined the Corps: William Alexander and Harry Nightingale. Like several earlier recruits, they enlisted primarily to avoid prosecution for relationships with German women. Shortly afterwards, the British Free Corps was transferred to Dresden for combat training. In addition to military instruction, the "Free Britons" continued to devote considerable time to sports and other recreational activities.

In November, Thomas Cooper, who had repeatedly tried to leave the Corps, was removed from his command position. Ironically, he was accused of engaging in anti-Nazi activities. He was subsequently reassigned as a military policeman, a role in which he would encounter several of his former comrades during the closing weeks of the war.

Also in November, most of the men previously accused of mutiny returned to the Corps under the leadership of Eric Pleasants, who shortly afterwards married a German woman. Two men were absent: Tom Perkins, who remained in the penal camp, and Herbert Rowlands, who had escaped and gone into hiding in one of Berlin's suburbs. They were joined by a new recruit, the South African Pieter Labuschagne.



'Free Britons' in SS uniform - second right - Alfred Minchin, second left - Kenneth Berry

During December 1944 and January 1945, William Miller joined the Corps after choosing service in the BFC instead of serving a four-month prison sentence. Another South African, Lawrence Viljoen,

also enlisted. The motives of several other volunteers were noteworthy. Douglas Mardon, another South African, was strongly influenced by the anti-Soviet sentiments he had developed through his contacts with Soviet prisoners of war. George Croft and John Sommerville had been prisoners since 1940, had become fluent in German, and worked as interpreters in their prisoner-of-war camp. Because of their position, they were frequently threatened by other prisoners, including violent criminal groups within the camp that were reportedly involved in robbery and sexual assaults (VK). Seeking protection from this harassment, both men eventually joined the British Free Corps.

Thus, by January 1945 the British Free Corps had reached its greatest strength during its brief existence, numbering twenty-seven men. Shortly afterwards, six Māori prisoners from New Zealand offered to join the Corps but were rejected by the Australian Roland Barker, who declared that the BFC was "for whites only."

Despite this increase in numbers, the Corps remained deeply unstable. With the war clearly drawing to a close, a group of "Free Britons" decided to escape, intending to reach Soviet lines and surrender. The attempt failed. Cowie, Futch, and Alexander were captured and sent to an isolation camp, while the remaining escapees were returned to the Corps. Another reluctant recruit, Alexander MacKinnon, arrived after being threatened with court-martial on charges of "sabotage." At about the same time, Charlie Munns left the unit in an attempt to reunite with his fiancée in Danzig; little is known of his subsequent fate.

On 13–15 February 1945, Dresden was devastated by massive Allied bombing raids. Lawrence Viljoen suffered severe burns and was admitted to hospital. Around this time, Britten, who had long been planning an escape, confided in his Norwegian girlfriend, a nurse, revealing both his intentions and his knowledge of the impending air raid. She immediately reported him to the Gestapo, resulting in the arrest of nearly the entire Corps. Only Heighes and How managed to escape by blending into a column of prisoners of war being evacuated westward.

The history of the British Free Corps, however, did not end there. The arrested men were soon released and transferred to Berlin, where the German authorities decided that the time had come to commit them to combat. Another reluctant recruit, Frank Axon, also arrived. According to later accounts, he had been forced to join the Corps under threat of punishment after striking a cow, allegedly causing it to calve prematurely.

Few of the "Free Britons" welcomed the prospect of fighting against the advancing Red Army. Symonds, Rose, and Nightingale persuaded the authorities to return them to prisoner-of-war camps, while Pleasants and Leister were transferred to separate units of the Reich Ministry of Propaganda.

For four days, the remaining members of the Corps underwent intensive training with the Panzerfaust anti-tank launcher and the new MP 44 assault rifle. Finally, on 15 March, the entire British Free Corps—small enough to fit into a single truck—departed for the front to take part in what Nazi propaganda described as the "Crusade against Bolshevism." Upon arrival, the Corps was attached to the III (Germanic) SS Panzer Corps, whose ranks included Germans, Danes, Dutchmen, and Norwegians. Even before seeing combat, the unit lost another member when George Croft was evacuated for treatment after a recurrence of gonorrhoea.

On 22 March, the Corps was assigned to reinforce a reconnaissance battalion held in reserve by the SS Division *Nordland*, one of the most multinational formations in the Waffen-SS. Four more weeks passed without any combat, and whatever enthusiasm for military service remained among the members of the Corps steadily evaporated.

At this point, Thomas Cooper reappeared. Ordered to proceed to the front on 6 April, he prudently packed a civilian suit before travelling to the headquarters of the III SS Panzer Corps. There he was unexpectedly instructed to visit the British Free Corps. Speaking with his former comrades, Cooper discouraged them from attempting another escape, fully aware that deserters captured by the German Military Police could expect no mercy. More importantly, he succeeded in convincing SS-Brigadeführer Joachim Ziegler, commander of the Corps, that the British Free Corps possessed little

military value, was politically unreliable, and should be withdrawn from the front. Ziegler accepted his recommendation, and the "Free Britons" were sent back to Templin.

On 19 April, the final notable figure in the history of the Corps appeared. Douglas Berneville-Claye, wearing the uniform of an SS-Hauptsturmführer, arrived to assume command of the unit. Before the war he had served as an officer in the British Army, resigned his commission, and later rejoined the service. His civilian life had also been marked by repeated criminal offences, including theft, bigamy, and various frauds. Captured in North Africa while serving with the British Commandos, he had later been exposed by fellow prisoners as a German informer and was removed from the prisoner-of-war camp by the Germans for his own protection. Little is known about his activities between then and April 1945. He was reportedly eager to lead the British Free Corps into combat, but Cooper prevented him from doing so. Shortly afterwards, Berneville-Claye disappeared together with MacKinnon, and within a few days both surrendered to Allied forces.

On 2 May 1945, Cooper and what remained of the British Free Corps surrendered to American troops near Schwerin. By that time, Bachelor and Stokes had already left the unit. In total, British investigators arrested twenty-seven men in connection with the activities of the Corps. Eric Pleasants happened to be in the Soviet occupation zone, where he was arrested in early 1946 on suspicion of espionage and spent seven years in a labour camp near Vorkuta.

The post-war fates of the "Free Britons" varied considerably. Cooper and MacLardy were sentenced to life imprisonment, although Cooper appears never to have disclosed his alleged participation in punitive operations in occupied Poland during the investigation. He was released in 1953, while MacLardy's life sentence was later reduced to fifteen years. Britten received a ten-year sentence but was released early because of ill health. Wilson was sentenced to ten years, Symonds to fifteen years, and Kenneth Berry—the youngest member of the Corps—to only nine months' imprisonment. Edward Martin, the Canadian, received a twenty-five-year sentence in Canada. The South Africans Mardon, Viljoen, and Labuschagne were acquitted, although the latter was fined £75. The New Zealander Roy Courlander served seven years of his fifteen-year sentence before his release, after which he reportedly frequented public houses boasting of his service in the Waffen-SS. The Australians Stokes, Chipchase, and Williams, along with most of the remaining members of the Corps, were never prosecuted. Berneville-Claye was acquitted owing to insufficient evidence, remained in the British Army for a time, and was eventually discharged for theft.

The military career of the British Free Corps amounted to little more than a historical curiosity. In practical terms, this tiny organisation had no measurable impact on the course of the war. The overwhelming majority of prisoners of war from Great Britain and the Dominions remained faithful to their oath. Despite sustained efforts by Nazi propaganda, appeals to wage a "crusade against Bolshevism" or to fight against the "plutocrats and Bolsheviks" failed to attract more than a handful of volunteers.

Appendix

John Amery's Proclamation of the Legion of St George*

BRITISH NATIONAL REPRESENTATION

PROCLAMATION TO ALL BRITISH SUBJECTS INTERNED

FELLOW COUNTRYMEN:

150,000 of our fellow countrymen are in prison in the home country, because they have declared themselves against this fratricidal war. In violation of the Habeas Corpus Act and the fundamental laws of our constitution these men have never been brought to trial or even allowed to see a lawyer.

American troops have not only occupied Ulster but are arriving in increasing numbers in England.

Naval bases and Colonies have been handed over to Mr. Roosevelt's administration.

BEYOND ALL THIS

This war has ceased to be a war of nations but has become a war of CONCEPTION

Europe and our country, your wives and children at home are menaced by the invasion of the HORDES OF BOLCHEVICK BARBARITY.

For this reason, I have approached the German Government with the proposal to form A BRITISH LEGION AGAINST BOLCHEVISM, to be known as the LEGION of ST GEORGE.

I appeal to all Britishers to answer this call to arms for the defense of all the principles that we Englishmen have been the first to proclaim in the world.

THE DEFENCE OF OUR HOMES, OF OUR CHILDREN AND OF ALL CIVILISATION AGAINST THE DRAGON OF ASIATIC AND JEWISH BESTIALITY.

The St George Legion will fight only against the Communists and on NO OTHER FRONT!

All men will commence in their present rank and promotion will be open to all men alike, without any distinctions or qualification, political or otherwise. Within the limits of the military possibilities the Legion of St George will fight at the junction of the German-Finnish front, beside the troops of the undaunted liberty loving Finnish people.

The British Representation in Berlin formally guarantee to all ranks: A PERMANENT WELL PLACED JOB IN THE BRITISH ADMINISTRATION OR A PRIORITY IN ANY OTHER EMPLOYMENT THEY SHOULD DESIRE ONCE PEACE IS SIGNED, OR THE POSSIBILITY TO FORM THE ELITE IN THE NEW BRITISH ARMY.

Hundreds of soldiers have volunteered to join this Legion. Men who have escaped to England have come to join us. Three Royal Air Force aeroplanes have come over to us so far with their arms and equipment.

It is up to you civilians to give a hand to show that we intend to take our responsibilities to maintain THE INTEGRITY OF OUR EMPIRE, by giving the world proof that we have not all sold out to the JEW OR PLUTOCRAT.

I ASK YOU TO OPT NATIONAL

The British Representation which is a 100% British organisation will take no steps whatever of intimidation against the persons who do not opt, BUT fellow countrymen the world is watching us, EUROPE EXPECTS THAT EVERY CIVILISED MAN WILL DO HIS DUTY, National England desires that you will show yourselves worthy of Nelson's immortal signal:

ENGLAND EXPECTS THIS DAY EVERY MAN WILL DO HIS DUTY

Your place is with us Nationalists Your duty is to opt NATIONAL under the glorious banner of St George we are going to write a new page in the History of the British Empire: more, WE SHALL SAVE THE BRITISH EMPIRE FROM COMMUNISM AND AMERICAN RAPACITY.

We shall show the world that free Englishmen:

NEVER, NEVER WILL BE THE SLAVES OF A JEWISH PLUTOCRATIC TYRANNY, THAT WE ARE WORTHY DESCENDANTS OF THE YEOMEN THAT DICTATED MAGNA CHARTA.

Pay no attention to waverings or opposition: the first to opt will be the examples of bravery and courage to those that now waver or are against us but who will have to join us one day when they realise all the truth. In these fatal days when we are before the bar of civilisation: I beg, I demand, that you put aside all hesitations, all the prejudice, all the lies that have led you where you are ... that you take this IMMENSE OPPORTUNITY THAT I HAVE OBTAINED AND WITH ME, WITH ALL THOSE THAT HAVE ALREADY JOINED.

YOU WILL OPT NATIONAL ☐ FOR ENGLAND AND ST GEORGE!

PARIS 20-4-43

John AMERY

**St George Legion ☐ initial name of the British Free Corps*