

Lehr-Regiment Brandenburg z.b.V. 800



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He was the nightmare come true to the notoriously paranoid and vicious *Narodny Kommissaria Vnutrenny Del* (NKVD), the Soviet security service dreaded no less by Soviet citizens than by its German foe. Speaking fluent Russian and often dressed in NKVD uniforms, his special forces teams repeatedly stung the Red Army with daring “disguise” (*tarneinsatz*) operations. The name for this particular NKVD nightmare was **Leutnant Baron Adrian von Foelkersam**, an extraordinary officer serving in one of the most amazing special force units of World War II, the so-called “Brandenburgers.” Though little known in the west, the *tarneinsatz* executed on the Eastern Front by Foelkersam and the Brandenburgers demonstrate a level of courage and sophistication seldom surpassed in the annals of unconventional warfare. As always, the key to such success is found in the nature of the few men willing to take the most frightening risks. He would be awarded the Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross, Iron Cross First and Second Class.

"The impersonation of enemy soldiers represents the highest level of penetration technique in special operations. This mindset requires the self-confidence of the “con artist” and the nerves of a safecracker . . .” Dr. Edward N. Luttwak, Professor, International Relations.

Foelkersam was born in 1914 in St. Petersburg, Russia, the son of a Baltic German and former admiral in the Tsarist’s ill-fated navy during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5. Learning to speak colloquial Russian with native fluency would later prove invaluable to Foelkersam, as

would his deep affinity for the Russian culture and the subservient mentality of the Soviet soldier. His exceptional flair for languages and intelligence would manifest itself repeatedly during his youth as he learned English and studied at universities in Vienna and Berlin. Tall, slim, and with piercing gray eyes, his presence conveyed that hallmark of the 1930s-era German family with a proud heritage and a deeply ingrained sense of duty to family and country. This sense of duty certainly accompanied Foelkersam in 1939, following his transfer from the army's elite honor guard unit, *Wachtruppe Grossdeutschland*, to the ranks of an organization as ideally suited for his talents as he was for its covert mission.

Foelkersam and other carefully selected *Volksdeutsche*—German ex-patriates returning home to rally in support of Germany's National Socialism—reported for duty to a discrete, private estate near Brandenburg-on-the-Havel, a small town some thirty miles west of Berlin. As with the other candidates, Foelkersam's loyalty and personal talents had been rigorously screened before his recruitment to the *Abwehr*, Germany's foremost military intelligence service. Despite his obvious suitability for intelligence work in *Abwehr* Departments I (espionage) or III (counter-intelligence), however, it was not to these departments that this Baltic German had been recruited.

Foelkersam had in fact been selected to conduct *Abwehr* Department II's special mission: high-risk sabotage and subversion missions in times of peace and war, both abroad and even within Germany itself. Though the unit he would help form later that year would grow from company to division size throughout World War II, it was first activated as the 800th Special Purpose (z.b.V.) Construction Training Company. An intentionally bland title meant to obscure the real nature of its secret mission, this formal designation was seldom used by unit members who universally referred to themselves simply—but with considerable pride—as “Brandenburgers.”

So effective would Brandenburger *tarneinsatz* prove throughout World War II that even in the waning months of combat, even the rumor of “Brandenburgers” on the battlefield still spread consternation amongst Soviet and Allied armies. The devastating psychological effect of this fear was fully evident in December 1944, for example, when a handful of English-speaking German soldiers penetrated U.S. Army lines in Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge.

Employing the *tarneinsatz* tactics that were the hallmark of the Brandenburgers, this ad hoc Waffen SS unit spread chaos within the American ranks out of all proportion to the actual threat. General Eisenhower would later complain that the security measures taken to protect him from the assassination attempt rumored to be the goal of this special group, so smothered his ability to command that he became largely irrelevant to the outcome of this critical battle. It was no doubt a bitter pill to swallow for the proud general, but perhaps one made easier to take had the equally proud Red Army generals been available to share with him their bitter experiences with Brandenburgers on the Eastern Front.

Such a general-to-general conversation would have taken some time, as Brandenburger deep penetration missions had successfully attacked Soviet installations from the Arctic Circle to Persia. Had British generals joined this imaginary conversation, they could have told Eisenhower of their own bitter encounters with the Brandenburgers in France, the Mediterranean, North Africa, Iraq, and even along the Afghan-Indian border. Frequently operating closely with

disaffected nationals in these far-off lands, the Brandenburgers were more often hampered by their distance from Germany than by skillful countermeasures from their opponents.

More common for the Brandenburgers were the short-range penetration efforts; missions that were defined in an agreement between the *Abwehr* and the military services as operations to a maximum depth of fifteen kilometers behind enemy lines. For such missions Brandenburg companies were subordinated to the operational control of the respective Army Group in a given theater. Thus, from the very beginning of Germany's June 1941 invasion of Russia, Operation Barbarossa, Russian/Ukrainian-speaking Brandenburg teams were found throughout the foremost vanguards of the army's fast moving Panzer spearheads.

The Brandenburgers quickly proved invaluable to Germany's *Blitzkrieg* form of warfare, disrupting enemy communications and seizing intact the bridges needed to assure the continued momentum of the army's attacking panzer formations. One particularly effective *tarneinsatz* took place on the Dvina River in the Baltic Republic of Latvia, when Brandenburgers uniformed and armed as Red Army soldiers seized and held against determined enemy counter attacks a key bridge in the path of the advancing panzers.

By 1941 the basic combat unit for the now-regimental size Brandenburgers was the 300-hundred strong company; itself divided into one heavy platoon and two half-companies capable of independent action. The volunteers to the elite unit were—like Foelkersam—carefully screened for their political reliability and the psychological stability needed for operations behind enemy lines. Physical fitness and military proficiency in tactics and weapons were also stressed. Like the shock troops of the Waffen-SS the Brandenburgers trained extensively with live ammunition.

Furthermore, the men found in each company were usually assigned to that unit on the basis of their foreign language skills and ex-patriate experience in a particular region, e.g., Ukrainian-speaking Germans in the company targeted for operations in the Ukrainian sector. Transfers from company to company were thus rare, and the resulting cohesion among the men proved to be a key factor in the astonishing success they often achieved of their extremely high-risk missions. This was certainly true, for example, of Foelkersam's success as commander of the *Baltenkompanie*, a unit formed in 1941 largely of Germans born and raised in the pre-war Baltic republics.

The formation in Germany of Foelkersam's *Baltenkompanie* was soon followed by the return of the men to their familial homeland, as the German invasion of the Baltics earlier that year had quickly provoked a Soviet response. Moving just as quickly the *Abwehr* units in the Baltics began infiltrating a number of Red Army deserters back into their former units, generating in response valuable field intelligence that the *Baltenkompanie* would use to devastating effect.

During the ensuing months Foelkersam initiated and led a number of sabotage and disruption operations in the dark Baltic forests behind Soviet lines, capping these off with a daring raid against the headquarters of a Soviet Rifle Division. After reviewing the wealth of intelligence information brought back from this particular raid, an astonished and grateful *Abwehr* subsequently awarded Foelkersam a well-deserved Iron Cross.

The grim reality for most soldiers committed to years of exposure to front-line combat is that their ultimate release from this lethal environment will come only as a result of their suffering either a disabling injury, capture, or death. There are, however, a minuscule few that will escape these mortal statistics, not only surviving but in the process becoming even more dangerous as they master the art of killing. So, it was for Foelkersam in the winter of 1941/42, as nearly two years of Brandenburger combat in Poland, Belgium, and the Baltics had transformed the talented young officer into one of the most dangerous commando leaders of the war.

He would need all of his mastery the following August while leading a Brandenburger team to a stunning *tarneinsatz* success in the Caucasus region, some 1,500 hard-fought miles southeast from Germany. The target to be seized was oil; the natural resource needed above all others in 1942 by a severely extended German war machine. Thus, the capturing, intact, of the huge Soviet oil fields and refining center at Maykop, was of overwhelming strategic importance to Hitler's ambitions in the East.

German Army Group South dubbed it Operation Maykop, and by late July no less than three divisions from the III Panzer Korps were moving relentlessly southward from the Russian city of Rostov. Advancing through the mid-summer heat and choking dust of the Kuban steppe the panzers crushed all Soviet resistance as they closed in on the Maykop complex that would soon fuel their thirsty vehicles. For Foelkersam, however, Operation Maykop had already started weeks earlier in East Prussia where he selected sixty-two Baltic and Sudeten Brandenburgers for the special-purpose *Kommando* that he would take into the targeted oilfields.

The *Kommando's* complex three-stage mission called for it first to infiltrate the Russian defenses days in advance of the arrival of the main German forces—with a *tarneinsatz* obviously. Once inside the men were to find some means to reduce the Maykop defenses that lay in the path of the advancing panzers, then prevent the retreating Red Army from destroying the vital oil refinery and pumping facilities. Immediately after the selection of the required men, *Abwehr* Departments I and III placed Foelkersam and his Russian-speaking soldiers into an intense training program that rehearsed every facet of the daily life of a NKVD front-line unit.

Department I provided NKVD uniforms, weapons, training, discipline, and forged documents. Department III used information and documents from captured NKVD officers to thoroughly familiarize Foelkersam's men with both security service procedures and mannerisms that would be expected of real NKVD personnel. Russian was the only language permitted during this period. This indoctrination extended even to drilling the men after they had consumed quantities of vodka—the Russian's alcohol of choice—as even the most trivial German remark or curse would spell certain death for Foelkersam's entire force.

During their planned week behind enemy lines the fate of the entire *Kommando* would rest on each Brandenburger's ability to deceive the most security conscious and brutal security service in the world. This would be no quick bridge seizure, some wild but short-lived burst of excitement under enemy fire. Once inside the NKVD encampment, sixty-three Brandenburgers would work, sleep, eat, and drink with their unforgiving foes day after day, at every instant dreading that one mistake that would spell detection and death for every Brandenburger.

Following their training in East Prussia, the men joined the III Panzer Korps, then fifty miles northeast of Maykop, for a final pre-mission coordination and intelligence briefing. On the night of 1-2 August, the NKVD-uniformed Brandenburgers, carrying authentic identification papers, equipment, and weapons, were motored to within 15 miles of the oil fields to begin their footmarch through the Soviet lines.

Hours later the Brandenburgers came upon a Kuban village filled with disaffected soldiers from various retreating Soviet units. Fortune followed by quick thinking soon provided the Brandenburgers with another boost, as they discovered that in addition to a number of Russians the scene included many Cossack and Ukrainian nationals. Seizing the moment the fake NKVD detachment moved in at dawn, Foelkersam's men firing their weapons into the air for effect as they took control of nearly eight hundred apathetic soldiers.

As "Major Truchin" (Foelkersam) tongue-lashed them for their lack of patriotic spirit and courage, his men used standard NKVD procedure to separate the two major groups according to their nationality. Amidst the confusion of these first minutes the presence of numerous vehicles suddenly caught Foelkersam's eye. To the quick-thinking *Leutnant*, the trucks answered several questions as to his next step, and he moved quickly to exploit the momentum.

Leaving half of the detachment behind to guard the Russians, he mounted the remaining half of his force on two trucks, then force-marched the Cossacks down a road to a ravine a mile from the village. Three-quarters of an hour later the already-frightened soldiers in the village were startled by long bursts of gunfire coming from the direction in which the disloyal Cossacks had been herded.

Given every reason to believe that a typical NKVD execution had just taken place, those in the village never suspected that Foelkersam had in fact persuaded the thoroughly confused Cossacks in the ravine to desert en masse toward the advancing Germans to the north. No doubt grateful that it was the Cossacks, not themselves, that had gotten the knock, few in the village were inclined to ask questions as Foelkersam's group returned to the village, ordered them aboard their own vehicles and escorted them at gunpoint toward nearby Maykop.

Reporting to NKVD headquarters in Maykop brought more good news for Foelkersam, this time in the form of an unusually effusive greeting from the NKVD general responsible for the South Caucasus Front. News of his "liquidation" of the Cossacks had already reached the general's ears, so pleasing him that he scarcely looked at the NKVD orders Foelkersam offered for his inspection. His relationship with the general steadily improved during the following nights, fueled by the many glasses of vodka they shared. The days were even more productive as Foelkersam accompanied the general in his daily inspections of Maykop's disorganized defenses. His men were doing likewise with their NKVD counterparts, until by 7 August the Brandenburgers had developed the three-point plan they would implement with the arrival of the first panzers now only forty-eight hours from Maykop.

Foelkersam made his move in the early morning darkness of 9 August, dividing his men into three groups. Knocking out the army communications center was an obvious priority, and one of Foelkersam's team accomplished this task by surreptitiously planting timed-explosive charges

amongst the busy radio operators working inside. Even as the building went up with a roar minutes later, Foelkersam was already informing the senior artillery commander at Maykop that orders had been received directing their overall retreat from the oilfields.

Initially reluctant to believe the news, the lieutenant colonel promptly accepted Foelkersam's suggestion that he call the communications center to confirm the orders. And as Foelkersam expected, the artillery commander's reluctance evaporated even more promptly after discovering that his calls to the communications center failed to generate a response. From there Foelkersam immediately moved to the headquarters of the front-line infantry commander, repeating the orders that they too were to retreat. In the face of this commander's reluctance, Foelkersam invited the officer to look at the retreating artillery forces to his rear! These initial retreats caused in turn a domino effect all along the northern front-lines facing the oncoming panzers, now only some twenty kilometers away.

As Foelkersam's team generated chaos along the front lines a second Brandenburg-NKVD team successfully bluffed the staff of the North Caucasus Communications Center to abandon their building to join the growing retreat. Having done so, the men promptly began answering the frantic incoming calls pouring in from isolated units unable to reach the army communication center. All frantic callers were, of course, urged to join the overall retreat immediately.

Speed was obviously essential if the men were to prevent the Soviets from setting off the demolitions that would destroy the invaluable refineries, pumping stations, and oil storage tanks. Thus, the third Brandenburg team fanned out to their pre-designated targets in the oil fields, bluffing, when possible, the technicians and guards to abandon their posts; killing those who could not be bluffed. While a few panicked guards succeeded in blowing some of the facilities, the overwhelming majority of Maykop was ultimately seized intact.

The first panzers rolled into Maykop at mid-day on 9 August, having easily overcome the weak resistance offered by the few Red Army units who had waited too long to join the Brandenburg-induced retreat to the south. Fittingly their speedy arrival was further enhanced by a second group of Brandenburgers who, while posing as Soviet soldiers, had earlier seized a critical bridge on the outskirts of Maykop. For his remarkable nerve, courage, and leadership, during his seven harrowing days at Maykop, Foelkersam was subsequently awarded the coveted Knights Cross of the Iron Cross on 14 September 1942.

Maykop proved the high-water mark for German special operations on the Eastern Front, as a resurgent Soviet Army slowly but irreversibly began forcing the Germans onto the defensive later that year. Desperate for manpower to stem the advancing Soviets, army commanders soon began employing the *Abwehr's* highly trained and offensively oriented Brandenburgers for conventional infantry and anti-partisan duties. These new missions made little use of Foelkersam's talents, and appealed to a man of his temperament even less.

Thus in the fall of 1943 Foelkersam left his beloved Brandenburgers for assignment to Friedenthal, an ancient castle located deep in the Brandenburg forests ten miles northwest of Berlin. There, at the Waffen-SS headquarters of *Jagdverband Mitte* (Commando Unit Central), he would serve for the duration of the war in what was, for all intents and purposes, the Third

Reich's special operations "clearing house." There he met his future commander and Germany's most flamboyant commando, the ubiquitous *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Otto Skorzeny.

Active in special operations from the outset of war, Skorzeny had just trumped all of his previous achievements with his daring mountaintop rescue in Italy of the Italian Duce, Benito Mussolini. Still flush with his success and evidently a keen judge of talent, Skorzeny quickly made Foelkersam his chief of staff and trusted confidante for the burgeoning *Jagdverband*.

Staying close to Skorzeny meant staying close to the action, given the special trust Skorzeny enjoyed from Hitler. This trust was further solidified in July 1944, when, after the failed assassination attempt on Hitler at his headquarters in East Prussia, Skorzeny and Foelkersam played key roles in establishing order and safety from the confusion that reigned at the scene. Later apprised of their actions, an obviously shaken Hitler made clear the special favor in which he held Skorzeny and his men. Hitler's faith was shown again in October of that year, when Skorzeny and Foelkersam were sent to Budapest, Hungary, to execute one of the most politically sensitive missions of the war.

Operation *Panzerfaust* was of supreme importance to Germany. Its goal was nothing less than ensuring—immediately and by whatever means necessary—the continued loyalty of Hitler's wavering ally, Hungarian Regent Admiral Miklos Horthy. Should the regent succeed in his furtive efforts to make a separate peace with the Soviets, the advancing Red Army would trap nearly 400,000 German soldiers on the Eastern Front. The whole matter took on even greater urgency when, on 15 October, the regent went public for the first time with his hidden agenda, broadcasting on Hungarian radio his request to the Soviets for a cease-fire.

Working quickly and efficiently together, the Skorzeny-Foelkersam team ended the Regent's plan less than forty-eight hours after their arrival in Budapest. This they accomplished by first arresting the Regent's son—the Admiral's sole surviving heir—and placing him on a flight to Germany, then seizing the Burgberg Palace, Hungary's seat of government. Using speed, surprise, and bluff to minimize the bloodshed, the special operation had effectively spared nearly thirty German divisions from imminent entrapment. The cost to the German team: four dead and twelve wounded.

Operation *Panzerfaust* was another classic demonstration of that special élan that had become Foelkersam's trademark during years of high-risk missions. Nevertheless, time was rapidly running out for the former Brandenburger as 1944 grew to a close. Skill and daring were rarely in need at this late stage of the war, as the massive Allied tank armies from both East and West smashed into the reeling German army like steel fists into an opponent's rib cage. Barely two months after the successful conclusion of *Panzerfaust*, Foelkersam would push his luck in the Ardennes Forest of northeastern Belgium.

It was code-named Operation *Greif*, after the mythical animal that was half-eagle, half-lion. Moreover, it was to be Hitler's last great gamble of the war, a massive, stunning armored attack intended to split the American and British armies and seize the port of Antwerp. If it failed, all failed for the Germans. If it were to succeed, the onrushing panzers would once again have to rely on two Brandenburger specialties: bridge seizures and *tarneinsatz* aimed at causing the

maximum possible confusion within the enemy's ranks. This time the uniform worn by over one hundred of Skorzeny's English-speaking soldiers would be that of the U.S. Army.

Skorzeny formed an ad hoc Waffen SS group under the cover name "Panzer Brigade 150" for Operation *Greif*. In addition to the English-speaking *tarneinsatz*, element, the brigade would include Battle Groups X, Y, and Z, each dedicated to the seizure of a key bridge in the path of the planned attack. But after scoring initial successes, *Greif* went awry, both in the larger picture and for Skorzeny. Though only thirty-two of his English-speaking men made it through the American lines, they caused chaos and confusion far beyond their small numbers. Only twenty-four of these *tarneinsatz* soldiers later found their way back to German lines.

But the Battle Group X commander was killed almost immediately, forcing an already wounded Foelkersam to take command of the group. Less than two weeks Foelkersam and the exhausted survivors of Panzer Brigade 150 returned to Germany to rest and wait for the final act in the black drama which had become Germany in the final months of the war.

Recovering from his wound the following month, Foelkersam immediately pressed Skorzeny for command of *Jagdverband Ost* (Commando Unit East). Foelkersam could have few illusions about his prospects on the Eastern Front, which had now been driven back to a generally north-south line through the center of Poland. But perhaps personal factors beyond his sense of duty and patriotism were also involved. Like those of many other German officers, Foelkersam's wife and newborn daughter lived in the region of western Poland long-since "Germanized" from the period when Prussia ruled the region in the late eighteenth century. Foelkersam's family in fact lived in the major city of Posen, one hundred miles east of the German-Polish border.

In mid-January an extremely reluctant Skorzeny finally capitulated to Foelkersam's repeated requests. Immediately, now *SS-Sturmbannfuhrer* Foelkersam rushed to assume command of the 800-strong battalion then located in the Hohensalsa forests just west of Warsaw. There he rejoined many of his old comrades, former Brandenburgers who had transferred from the division after its reformation to a panzer-grenadier unit in late-1944. As Skorzeny feared, it was the last time he would see his loyal subordinate alive.

"Foelkersam was my best comrade and my most loyal friend. For all those who knew Adrian von Foelkersam, he is not dead. He scorned death too much, ever to die and be forgotten." *SS-Obersturmbannfuhrer Otto Skorzeny, Jagdverband Mitte*

Several weeks later, two officers and thirteen soldiers—all that remained of *Jagdverband Ost*—straggled back to German lines. Foelkersam was not among them. As the survivors recalled, a badly wounded and unconscious Foelkersam had been placed aboard an artillery tractor as the battalion split into smaller groups for an attempted breakout from entrapment during the night of 21-22 January. During the breakout the groups lost contact with each other, and the fate of Foelkersam's party was never determined.

Today Foelkersam's remains lie—most likely with his Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross—somewhere in the dark Hohensalsa forests, covered every winter by the same white mantle of snow that hides the graveyard of *Jagdverband Ost*. With these remains also lies something

else: a standard of courage and conduct that well befits the Profession of Arms from all countries, for all times.

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Top Image: Adrian von Foelkersam receives the Knight's Cross for the spectacular success of his "disguise" operation at Maykop, deep behind Russian lines on the Eastern Front. Photo Source: Bundesarchiv. Also in top image is the patch / insignia of the Brandenburg Division.

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