

The Karl Lemaire Story

The German speaking section of southeastern Belgium is one of the most culturally confused regions of modern Europe. Belgium's past reflects this turmoil. Beginning in 57 BC, Julius Caesar extended the power of Rome into the region of Europe that is now Belgium. The people Caesar encountered there were the *Belgae*, one of the various Celtic tribes of early Gaul, and the Romans dubbed their new province *Gallia Belgica*.

After centuries of war and a succession of dynasties, the area known as the Lowlands -- now Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg -- became the possession of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Two centuries of Spanish rule followed and in 1713, the Treaty of Utrecht transferred the country to the Austrian Hapsburgs. Napoleon Bonaparte annexed Belgium to France in 1794; but after his final defeat in the fields at Waterloo in 1815, the region was awarded to the Netherlands. This created great consternation; the Belgians declared their independence from the Netherlands in 1830. Although claiming itself neutral, in 1914 the tiny country became the scene of great battles between the Germans and French in the First World War. The area north of St. Vith had been part of Germany before the Kaiser failed in the trenches of World War I. However with the German defeat, the Treaty of Versailles bequeathed to Belgium as part of the repatriations on the Great War. The phrase, "Neubelgien" was coined to refer to the to the formerly German territories that were added to Belgium in 1919 as a result of the Versailles treaty. The change only served to heighten the already fractious politics associated with language in there.¹

In spite of the changed boundaries--the eastern agricultural region of the Liege province had been part of Germany before 1919-- there continued to think of themselves as Germans after German defeat in 1918. Most spoke German, while the surrounding Walloons spoke French-- the official language. Between 1918 and 1939, ethnic rivalry intensified between the Flemings of northern Belgium and the Walloons of the south. Despite Belgium's efforts to remain neutral in World War II, Belgium was invaded suddenly by German tank columns on the morning of May 10, 1940. As the Blitzkrieg swept across the country, the Belgian government evacuated to London. King Leopold III, however, surrendered to the German forces when the Belgian lines at Kortrijk were broken. With the reconquest, the territories of Eupen, Malmedy and St. Vith were annexed to the German Reich and the rest of Belgium occupied.

Contrary to the official position of the exile government in London, many of the people in southeastern Belgium thought of themselves as German first and foremost-- even in the midst of another war. But still others thought of themselves as French and Belgian-- an ethnic rivalry that continues on today. During the war, the schism was elevated by the Rexist movement promoting a Belgian flavor of fascism. This was epitomized by Leon Degrelle, an Ardennes local from the village of Bouillon.

Few stories capture better the schizophrenia of this region better the story of Karl Lemaire-- a Belgian SS trooper with the *1.SS Panzer Division*.² Charles Lemaire was born on 26 February 1923 to his father Emile and his German mother, Catherine Herbrant. He was born in Waimes-- the French spelling of then village-- but most of the people there knew it by its previous Germanic spelling-- Weismes. Charles and his family were part of the German speaking section of Belgians-- and there was nearly constant friction between the Flemish and Walloon sections of the population

before and after the war. When war began in 1939, the allegiances of the local population fractured. The German speaking portion predictably decided to join with the country that they considered their heritage-- Deutschland. Waimes settled into an uneasy endorsement of Hitler's vision for Europe. Downtown at the *Maison Schonberg*, where the flags for the local beer, Simon Pils flew, the wartime version took on a swastika. Many of the townspeople sided with the *Heimattreue-Front*.³

Lemaire's father had fought for the Kaiser in the Great War, so the decision was not not altogether surprising. Lemaire's birth name was Charles, but once he joined the German army it became Karl-- a more appropriate spelling for a soldier of the Waffen SS sending correspondence back to Belgium. Lemaire was a big strapping boy with brown hair and a giant figure. Although neighbors remembered him as none too smart, they agreed that he was a well liked and a decent young man. In spite of poor grades at school, he obeyed others well-- a desirable trait in the Waffen SS. Before the war, Lemaire had a girlfriend, Ottilie Riegel, who was the pharmacist's assistant in Waimes.⁴ Her father had been a National Socialist and *Hauptsturmführer* in the Waffen SS. When Belgium was liberated by the Americans, Riegel's father had moved back into Germany. Ottilie stayed behind.

Karl joined the *1. SS Panzer Division* soon after the start of the war and fought with the division in Russia. During the course of the war, Lemaire was something of an embarrassment for his hometown of Waimes. Often during the war, he had sent back post cards from his campaigning at each front of the many upon which the *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* found itself fighting. By late 1944, SS *Rottenführer* Karl Lemaire was on the staff of *SS Panzer Regiment 1* and part of *Kampfgruppe Peiper*.⁵ In the Ardennes, Lemaire found himself on the advance through Schoppen just south of Waimes on December 17th. Having survived years of combat on fronts all over Europe, the local boy was delighted to again be close to his home.

Reaching his tank outside of the village of Onderval that morning, Lemaire stopped outside of the house of Emma Dethier. Emma and her sister were standing on the main road to Onderval. They were standing on the road on the morning of the 17th just before mid-day. She says, "All of a sudden we heard the most God-awful noise coming from Onderval. Then we saw the biggest tank I had ever seen in my life. It was not an American tank because the American tanks were painted green." Meanwhile the local priest from Onderval took off pedaling like mad towards St. Vith. "I always remember his cassock flapping in the wind." She stood there while the tank roared amazed at the darkened faces of the soldiers in the German tank. They were blacked with camouflage paint. Tank after tank and after tank passed. One stopped outside and one got out in a black tanker's uniform. It was Karl Lemaire. He offered her sister, Maria Lecoq, a ride in his tank. Her sister was surprised when she accepted.

Karl took Maria by the arm and took her out of the house and into the huge panzer. They drove from Onderval to Thirimont and turned right and half way between Onderval and Thirimont he turned around to Maria and said to her, "The Americans are really bad soldiers. I have seen them in Normandy. They make no attempt at camouflage. They are totally unprofessional." But all this greatly frightened the girl who screamed she did want to go on. He let her out. So rebuffed, Karl then parked his tank on the road to Thirimont halfway to Waimes. It was getting dark and everyone was tired from two days of uninterrupted advance. He left the crew to sleep with the iron beast which had been damaged and was undergoing repair. But being so close to home, Karl understandably opted to make his way on by foot to Waimes even though he had one foot in a

plaster cast.

As the light of December 17th faded, he walked down the narrow tree-lined path until he came to the modest two story brick house on the outskirts of Waimes. With no warning, the door to the Lemaire household was suddenly flung open without a knock. A large man in an SS uniform towered in the door and confidently strode across the floor. He called out in Walloon, "How are things in Waimes?" Yvonne, Karl's sister, was delighted; she ran over to hug him. Her brother was home. Later that Sunday, a neighbor Leo Fagnoul stopped by to make a nightly visit. Inside, Mr. Fagnoul was surprised to see was Karl, who had long been away with the war. He had been with the panzers from Thirimont he related to his sister Yvonne and Mr. Fagnoul. He had brought himself close to his home and had parked his tank just outside the edge of town for the night. Long away from home, he would sleep there for the night and scout his hometown for re-occupation the following morning.

Karl asked Yvonne if she knew anything about his girlfriend, Otti Riegel. After the Americans came in September, the local populace in Waimes had taken his German girlfriend, Otti-- the pharmacy assistant, and shaved her head. For further humiliation, they made her face a grave for hours, and then locked her up in Verviers. Learning of all this, Karl's anger swelled, and he vowed revenge against the mayor or the town and voiced hatred for the enemy. But soon even this was forgotten amid his weariness and he fell asleep.

About midnight someone knocked at the door of the home and Yvonne Lemaire, Karl's sister, answered. She was shocked to see two soldiers in American uniforms standing there. She could plainly see that the two men were wearing German uniform trousers and carrying German mess kits. They spoke German, "Is there a German soldier here?" they asked. "Yes," she told them hesitating, "There is an SS man here."⁶ The two seemed pleased and entered. Since it was late, the Germans in American disguise decided to spend the night inside.

The next morning upon awakening, Yvonne was shocked to see that American soldiers were standing in the streets of Waime. And these looked to be the real thing! Lemaire's sister woke him urgently and Karl dressed in a hurry. He and his comrades quickly left the house through the back yard and crossed the fields towards Thirimont. To defuse suspicion, Yvonne opened the house door and started sweeping the doorstep outside. The Americans suspected nothing and went on their way.⁷

Meanwhile, Karl escaped the trap and began scouting in the village. There seemed to be only a few Americans, but he must find out so that he could report back to his commander. They armed their pistols and moved down the streets. Lemaire knew the area like the back of his hand. What he didn't know was that he was about to have a fateful encounter.

In Waimes part of the 1st Platoon of the 47th Field Hospital set up at the school house in town.⁸ There were two surgical teams of eight men assisted by four nurses. On the morning of December 17th, Nurse Lt. Mabel Jessop knew that trouble was brewing at the front. Although, their our commanding officer was in the dark, they had the news from shaken first hand witnesses-- battle casualties. "We eagerly questioned the men from the 2nd Division and 99th Division that were brought in and they were in a state of acute jitters."⁹ Ruth Nance Elbrader was a nurse with the 3rd Platoon which was located in a two story building in Dom Butgenbach. On the 17th, "When I

awakened I could hear small arms fire and it seemed close by." She was dismayed to see a lot of American troops moving away to the west. And worst of all, it seemed disorderly.¹⁰

Later at 8 AM an officer came and told everyone to leave Butgenbach immediately. The Germans were almost upon them. "We left everything. Lt. Margaret Kuntz was not even allowed to get her coat." At about 9 AM, Ruth arrived with their patients from Butgenbach and they informed the people of the 1st platoon of the gravity of the situation nearby. The doctors and nurses tried to put on a brave face for their patients, but "we knew things looked bad." At one PM the 47th was ordered to evacuate to Malmédy. "I never saw such a quick job of loading," Jessop remembered. Soon the ambulance convoy of doctors, nurses and equipment was motoring along the Belgian countryside. This they did crossing the fateful Baugnez crossroads at 1 PM just as Peiper's armored column approached the fateful crossroads.

Although they could not see the German armor, shells suddenly began to fall around the ambulance as it motored down the N-32 towards Baugnez. "Our driver drove off the road and sought protection in a wooded area...The shells were still coming in. Sister we were scared!" The nurses and doctors hastily abandoned their trucks which were being shelled to pieces and decided to head cross-country back towards Waimes. The group wearily trudged through the mud and slush for half an hour trying to conceal themselves from the enemy who could not be far away. But as they approached the road headed east towards Waimes, they sighted another serial of American trucks and flagged them down.

Soon they were back in Waimes where they returned to the school to find the hospital mostly dismantled. But surveying their situation they had few options. Obviously the way west was cut off, Butgenbach to the east was known to be in German hands and to the south was where the Germans seemed to be coming from. They would like have pulled out to the north, but they would have required going to the road junction a mile to the east-- the direction they most wanted to avoid. Shells fell occasionally into the town and the 47th resigned itself to being taken as prisoners. But soon more casualties arrived from Butgenbach and everyone forgot the fact that they were surrounded and set themselves to trying to save the lives of the severely wounded.

Later that morning, Lt. Jessop was feeling better. A hot breakfast and the shelling had stopped in spite of word that German vehicles had passed through the town the night before. At 10 she left her ward to get a cigarette outside. She walked down the long corridor to cross the courtyard which led onto a street. "As I walked towards the gate, I saw two men approaching. One was dressed in a German captain's uniform." She did indeed, it was Karl Lemaire. and The other German soldier wore an American uniform with a Sergeant's stripes and a 5th Armored shoulder patch. They pointed their rifles at Mabel. "Your hospital is under arrest!" barked the soldier in the American uniform, "Everybody line up in the yard!" The nurses and assistants walked out into the yard while the Lemaire moving down the line telling everybody to surrender arms and personal equipment. Jessop was amused to see Lemaire end up with a dandy collection of scissors, scalpels and fountain pens. The two Germans announced that everyone had ten minutes to gather their belongings. While they worked to assemble their things Jessop was dismayed to see many of the people of the village welcoming the Germans back into Waimes. A woman who ran the local tavern even came across the street to embrace Lemaire. He was, after all, her nephew.

Sgt. Cecil B. Tennis was lying on the operating table while all this transpired. In charge of the motor

pool with the 924th Field Artillery Battalion of the 99th Division, he had been brought from near Rocherath where he had been severely wounded by a German artillery round that morning. A doctor loosened his bandages and took a look at his severely burned face, "Pretty bad shape," he said quietly. Cecil Tennis was totally blind.¹¹

Presently, however, Major Earl L. Laird, the platoon commander came out of the hospital still garbed in white. He held his gloved hands in the air while speaking with his captors. He argued that he was in the middle of an operation. "What of all our seriously wounded?" he said pulling down his mask, "It is contrary to the rules of the Geneva convention to move them. A series of arguments and counter-proposals began as the American clad German soldier translated back and forth. The dickering took a long time, but finally Lemaire relented. Non transportable patients were to be left behind under the care of four officers. Everyone else was to get on the trucks right away. Laird came back in. "Don't panic," he said to Tennis still on the operating table, "I think there are only a few Germans and our men may liberate us gain." He was right.

As everyone worked to get everything on the trucks, someone noticed that the two German men were suddenly running away. The reason why was quickly apparent as olive drab halftracks appeared at the bottom of the street and began blazing away with machine gun fire in their direction. All the nurse and doctors hit the ground. Lemaire and his accomplice fired as they ran, but their shots were wild. Several Americans were wounded, but it seems likely that they were hit by friendly fire. The story from the American side is quickly told. Lt. Col. Charles T. Horner, was the commander of the 3rd battalion of the 16th Infantry of the 1st Infantry Division who was moving his command south of Verviers in heavy traffic on the morning of December 17th:

"The road was jammed with vehicles heading to the rear. These were loaded with casualties heading towards Butgenbach. They told me the hospital they had just come from in Waimes was in German hands and the personnel there were being prepared to be evacuated as POWs to Germany. With an AA halftrack, I proceeded to Waimes and found the enlisted personnel of the 99th Division Clearing Company and the 47th Field Hospital being held in the school yard by three or four German soldiers. A few burst of Quad 50 fire from a halftrack put them to flight..."¹²

At 11 AM, just one hour after they had been captured, Lt. Col. Horner announced to the 47th that the situation was under control. Just then more machine gun fire erupted and everyone cringed. "Don't worry," Horner reassured them, "that's my men chasing the Jerries." Remembered Jessop, "We could have hugged him."

Meanwhile, Karl and his cohorts escaped through the streets they knew so well. He did not stop until he reached the panzer which was still in bivouac just outside Waimes. The Americans were in the town he told his crew, but they were not strong. They should drive the Panther into the town and cast them out. On they came, clanking down the streets of Waimes. Karl pulled his tank up on the minor road above the and main street in town. From there he fired two rounds in anger, one in the direction of the church and the other at the old post office (you can still see where the round exploded). The next house he came to on his right, a woman-- some said it was a relative-- came out and ran up to give the tankers a bottle of cognac.

Further on the along the road, Karl stopped by the Demoulin's household in Waimes. Karl had grown up with the family. He wanted the village people to see him, now as a big SS man. Little Andre was ten and he came out of the house and was amazed at the sheer size of the panzer and recognized Karl immediately. "Come on up on my tank," Lemaire blustered from atop the turret. He went to get on, but his father Etienne, a practical carpenter, grabbed his collar, "If you go on that," he whispered in his ear, "you'll go to hell and not come back." Andre stepped back.¹³ After an awkward moment, both Karl Lemaire and the tank were gone.

But the Americans in the town were chasing down the German tank prowling the streets and making such a racket. Lemaire's tank was fired on by Americans light tanks, who then were fired upon themselves. Seeing that the source of the racket was a Panther tank, they prudently pulled back. Lemaire and his crew put in pursuit chasing the M5 Stuarts to the south.

After the confusion in Waimes, an armored car of the 1st Reconnaissance Troop of the 1st Infantry Division and a group of engineers from the 1st Engineer Battalion were posted on a road block on the southeast of town to keep out enemy patrols. Suddenly that Tuesday morning, two U.S. light tanks in Waimes came streaming back to their roadblock yelling excitedly that a Panther tank was in hot pursuit of them coming from inside Waimes! Every gun at the road block was facing the wrong way. Sgt. Dufrane, in charge of the command car, attempted to move its gun into position only to have it stall and refuse to move. He promptly ordered his crew out and told them to grab bazookas and take positions across the street behind a wall. They had just gotten there when the big Panther came lumbering around the corner. Seeing the stalled armored car, the German tank promptly fired three quick rounds through the turret of the armored car and the building behind it. It exploded violently. The engineers in turn loosed their rockets on the Panther, which seemed to have damaged its firing mechanism, but otherwise seemed impervious. It backed off and waddled down the road. Dufrane and his crewmen were peeved enough on losing their armored car to chase the tank through town until they lost it on foot. "It is reported they are still sore," reported the V Corps G-2 summary.¹⁴

And what of Karl Lemaire, the Belgian SS man? On the way out of town he urged his family to leave town:

“Later, Karl and his tank stopped in front of our house and urged me to climb on it. After all the mess he had left in Waimes, he said, my family couldn’t stay there any longer. So, my mother, my sister and myself, after quickly taking some belongings climbed on the tank and left to Thirimont. In Thirimont, we left Karl and made our way on foot towards Emmels [NW of St. Vith]. We stayed there a couple of weeks and then we were evacuated to Germany and finally ended up near Kiel with the family of Otti Riegel. While we were in Emmels, I learned that Karl and his outfit were in Ligneuville. I walked there, but didn’t see Karl. The village was very damaged and I finally came across some members of his unit. They told me Karl had already left...”¹⁵

Another Belgian acquaintance saw him in the town of Ligneuville to the south repairing his tank after the encounter. But the battle of Waimes was over as was Karl Lemaire's last trip home.

Epilogue

Karl Lemaire died in fighting some of the last actions of the Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler in Austria near the village of Lillienfeld on 19 April 1945-- just 18 days before the close of the war in Europe. The suffering for Lemaire's family did not end there. With the end of the war, Lemaire's father Emile hung himself. The family was hounded by French speaking Belgians for the simple fact that Karl Lemaire had fought with the Waffen SS.¹⁶

1. Even today, the language dispute in the region is clearly visible. Official road signs showing the spelling of local villages are often white washed by locals and corrected to the German spelling. For instance, signs for Bullange almost always are blotted out in favor of Büllingen. For further discussion, see Kurt Fagnoul, 1985. Die annullierte Annexion, Vom Wiener Kongreß bis zum Ende Bolleniens, Ein Beitrag zur Grenzgeschichte von Eupen-Malmedy-St.Vith unter Berücksichtigung der belgischen Gebietsforderungen nach dem 2. Weltkrieg, Sankt Vith, Aktuell Verlagsgesellschaft.

2. Story of Karl Lemaire unless otherwise cited, quotes from author's interviews with Andre Demoulin, 23 March 1996 (Waimes), Emma Dethier (Faymonville), 10 October 1995 and Yvonne Hody-Lemaire, (Verviers) 23 December 1998. Thanks to Will Cavanagh and Jean Philippe Speder for help with the interviews.

3. The History of Waimes, Belgium: Periode Nazie 1940-1944; Local history of the village published on the 1300th anniversary of the founding of the village; Also Kurt Fagnoul, Kriegsschicksale, "Mislungerner Handstreich in Weimes," Buch-Offsetdruckerei & Verlag H. Doepgen-Beretz, St.Vith, Belgium.

4. Lemaire's girlfriend, Otti, has often been incorrectly identified as Lottie Riegel. Interview with Yvonne Hody-Lemaire, 23 December 1998, courtesy Jean Philippe Speder.

5. "Karl Charles Henri Paul Lemaire, Truppenteil, Stab. Pz. Rgt. 1/1.SS-Div.," Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V., Kassel. Thanks to Neil Thomson for assisting with obtaining this information.

6. Fagnoul, op cit, p. 247.

7. Interview with Yvonne Hody-Lemaire, 23 December 1998, courtesy, Jean Philippe Speder.

8. Primary sources for the story of the 47th Field Hospital includes "47th Field Hospital, Resume of Activities for Month Ending 31 December, 1944," NA, RG 407, College Park, MD. as well as the account by Mabel Jessop in Frontline Surgeons and author's interview with Ruth Nance Elbrader, November 18, 1995.

9. Account of Mabel Jessop from Maj. Clifford Graves, Front Line Surgeons "The Teams of Majors Hurwitz and Higginbotham," excerpt in The Charles B. MacDonald Papers, Box 7, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA, p. 247-251.

10 . Author's interview with Ruth Nance Elbrader, 3rd Platoon, 47th Field Hospital, November 18, 1995. The army field hospital was designed to operate near the battlefield and to save those who needed extensive care. They took no ambulatory patients; each platoon could handle approximately 100 patients and the four doctors and six nurses usually worked 12-hour shifts. "The doctors were all business," she said, "MASH is fiction. We did not have time for friendly discourse. The doctors and enlisted men were very professional and were all tired and usually exhausted." The receiving ward separated the patients needing the most care. "It was obviously a terrible place...you never get used to seeing people die."

11. Story of Cecil B. Tennis and associated quotations from letter from Tennis to Carlo Biggio, November 24, 1990.

12. Letter of Charles T. Horner to Will Cavanagh, 7, April, 1982; copy in author's possession.

13. Interview with Andre Demoulin, Waimes, March 23, 1996.

14 . U.S. V Corps, Annex No. 5 to G-2 Periodic Report No. 185, "Panther Hunt in Weimes," RG 407, National Archives, College Park, MD.

15 . Interview with M. Hody-Lemaire, op.cit.

15. Interview with Madame Yvonne Hody-Lemaire "After the war, when we came back to our house in Waimes, we came across three men I knew well and they started to beat us. They were part of the *Armee Blanche*. We used to call them 'last minute heroes.' They took me to the gendarmeries and on the way tried to shave me...The gendarmeries were nice to me and explained to me that refugees coming back from Germany had to be transferred to Verviers to be judged. So the next morning, my family and myself were transferred to Verviers. When we arrived we clearly felt the animosity towards us. This is when I decided to destroy the photos of Karl I had in my billfold. I flushed them in the toilets at the rail station." Madame Hody-Lemaire still lives in Verviers.