

## The Wormhoudt Massacre

Written by Andy Owen



It was 28th May 1940.

The British Expeditionary Force was in tatters and on the run.

Everyone was desperately trying to get back to Dunkirk before the Germans completely overran them and they were either killed or captured.

It had been a rout. A massive and embarrassing defeat.

As part of the retreat, the British 48th Division were holding the road that ran southwards from Berques through Wormhoudt, Cassel and Hazebrouck.

Their job was to delay the German advance, to give as many troops as possible, a chance to get to Dunkirk, grab a boat and get home.

It was an impossible task. But these brave men and others took it on and many gave their lives doing it.

They were facing a formidable, ruthless and well-equipped enemy.

3,000 troops, supported by elements of the 14th Motorised Corps under General von Wietersheim, including the SS Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler, under the command of Josef Dietrich.

They were additionally supported by Panzers from the 19th Armoured Corps under General Guderian.



At around 0500, the Germans attacked. The attack was across a broad front and the Germans started to advance in the direction of Ledringhem, Esquelbecq and Wormhoudt.

The few hundred British boys were hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned.

Heavy German artillery started to shell Esquelbecq and just after 0800 the first German troops arrived in the town that was left relatively undefended after C Company were pulled out.

The Germans decide to use Chateau Bergerot as an advance HQ and Josef Dietrich arrived shortly after the building was secured.



When the Germans arrived, they made the owner of the chateau bring out old master paintings that had been hanging on the walls.

They told him and his staff to lean them up against a wall.

They laughed as they shot them all up, destroying priceless works of art.

As the morning drew on, the British positions in Wormhoudt were pulverised by Stuka dive-bombers - and shortly after, German artillery opened up, hitting them even harder.

It was hell on earth.



Despite all this, the British soldiers held their positions for all of the morning.

At 1300, communications were breaking down and all the defenders started to withdraw further into Wormhoudt.

At 1345, the frustrated Germans launched a massive co-ordinated attack using armour as well as infantry.

At 1430, German armour broke through B Company's position on the Esquelbecq road and on entering the town, they turned south to link up with the attack from the south. This outflanked A Company who could not hope to hold off the armour with rifles and LMG's.

At 1650, The British boys had exhausted their ammunition and could no longer offer any real credible resistance. They had put up a heroic defence of the town, despite being massively outnumbered and outgunned.

They surrendered. They had no other option.

By holding the road for so long, they allowed many retreating troops to get through to Dunkirk. They had achieved their mission.

The majority of the prisoners captured in Wormhoudt were from D Company defending the southernmost part of the town. They were marched across the field they had been defending - and crossed a bridge that led to the Cassel-Wormhoudt road.



On reaching this road, they turned towards Wormhoudt.

About 500 yards from a church, the prisoners were halted and it was here that their mistreatment started. They were roughly searched and stripped of all their belongings, including their ID discs

Many of them were viciously beaten.

One of the soldiers described his own experience at the point of capture and soon afterwards.

*"We were in a ditch and the bottom was very damp, so we covered ourselves in mud to escape the enemy.*

*It was in this ditch that I had my first sight of the enemy, and it was a hell of a shock: SS men as tall as Royal Guardsmen, black uniforms under camouflage capes, holding light machine guns, and rifles with bayonets gleaming on the end with grenades in their hands - and two silver flashes on their capes and tunic collars.*

*The Nazis had two half-tracks, which were looming over us. They were threatening us.*

*One of them, who must have been an interpreter, gave an order to one of the chaps in charge of an armoured vehicle. He was a middle-aged man wearing decorations on his chest; his nose was flattened. At that moment the light tank started up and made for us with all guns firing. It seemed as if it was going to crush us at the bottom of the ditch.*

*The driver of the tank who was brandishing a revolver gave us the order to get out of the ditch, which I did with Ball and Edkins behind me.*

*Straight away, five or six SS surrounded us and took away our jackets, tin hats and identity discs. 'Flat nose' asked for information about our unit, where our HQ was, what other troops were in the sector - all in perfect English.*

*Edkins answered that he was not obliged to reveal anything but name, rank and number.*

*Immediately the SS hit us, pulled us to the ground by our hair, spat in our faces and called us 'English Bastards'. One of them pretended to pull the pin out of a grenade and I thought as he did so that he would suffer as much as we would!*

*Suddenly a British 15cwt truck arrived just where we were and stopped nearby. I saw the passenger, an officer, and driver put up their hands to surrender.*

*What I saw I will never forget ...*

*Without a single order, one of the SS troops with a machine-gun pisted the two British to their seats.*

*I think they took the whole magazine. The SS began to cheer the gunner, then one of them went around the back, took a can of petrol, poured it over the bodies and truck and struck a match! The vehicle was on fire when another British truck, a 30 cwt Bedford, arrived from the same direction.*

*The SS opened fire immediately, and the Bedford stopped near the first truck with one wheel in the ditch. I think the driver must have been killed or badly wounded as I never saw him.*

*Five SS went round the vehicle and made one of our lads get out: he must have had a watch-chain which a Nazi made a grab for; the Tommy wasn't willing to be robbed, so the Hun put his pistol to the prisoner's chest and shot him at point blank range.*

*He fell without a word.*

*Then the murderer took the watch, held it to his ear, and began to laugh as he danced around the corpse.*

*Two other British lads were taken out of the truck and put with us. They told me they belonged to the Warwickshire Regiment".*

*The group were frogmarched to join the main group of POW's, who were held a bit further up the road near the church. There were a small number of French prisoners as well.*

*Some of the other guards went to a Cafe called St Hubert where they started to drink large amounts of alcohol. The POW's were forced to keep their hands in the air.*

Further along the road, the Germans had lined another group of British soldiers up against a wall.

While they were waiting there, the SS that were with them, opened fire on them with machine guns.

They fell like rag dolls.

All of them were murdered.



A short while later, a German officer came out of the cafe and told them to lower their hands.

They were marched along Rue d' Englise towards the SS Battlefield Battalion HQ recently set up in the town.

As they marched along this road, other British soldiers that were hiding in the houses, decided to surrender as the column of men were passing.

They were quickly searched and roughly pushed into the group.

The guards then moved them off the road and they were marched down a farm track.

At the end of the track was a barn.





***The barn today***

They were in La Plaine au Bois.

There were now close to 100 of them.

The SS guards pushed them into the barn. As they talked amongst themselves in the barn, the mood was dark. They were all very frightened.

The brutal conduct of the SS guards since they surrendered and the general demeanour of the guards, with a lot of them drunk, was very worrying.

They were right to be worried. Their captors were bad boys.

*Very bad boys.*

In fact, they didn't come much worse than this lot. They were the infamous Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler.



An elite group - and fanatical. They had given an 'absolute' oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler.

The soldiers in the barn knew they were in desperate trouble.

On arrival at the barn a British officer protested about the treatment they had received since capture.

He was immediately rebuked by an SS soldier.

Then he was shot.

The Germans suddenly became very excited. Some of the British boys started to pray.

Then, without warning, the guards opened the barn doors and threw stick-grenades into the building, killing many POW's instantly.





The grenades failed to kill everyone, largely due to the bravery of two British NCO's Sergeant Stanley Moore and CSM Augustus Jennings, who hurled themselves on top of the grenades using their bodies to suppress the force of the explosion.

This shielded many of their comrades from the blast.

More grenades were thrown in. But many in the barn were still alive.

Upon realising this, the SS called for two groups of five to come out.

The men came out and were all shot. But they concluded that these methods were too slow, so the SS troopers simply fired into the barn, raking everyone with their weapons.

It was cold-blooded murder.

After a minute or two, the screams had stopped, replaced by the moaning of the badly wounded and dying.

The Germans gave them no mercy. They shot them as they lay on the ground.

Soon there was silence in the barn.

The Germans were laughing and joking with each other. After a few minutes, they started to make their way down the farm track back to the road.

A total of 80 very brave men had been murdered in just a few minutes.

Incredibly, a handful of British prisoners were still alive in the barn, having been shot, but they had feigned death to survive.

A couple of them had escaped through a panel at the back of the barn and were hiding in the undergrowth in the field behind.

After a couple of days, some of the survivors, who had crawled away and used ditches to escape, were found by regular German Army troops, who were appalled to hear their story.

They were given to medics and taken to hospital.

Their wounds were treated before they were sent to prisoner of war camps in occupied Europe.

The Waffen-SS division, Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, was under the overall command of Oberstgruppenführer Sepp Dietrich.

It was alleged from post-war testimony that it was specifically soldiers of the 2nd Battalion under the command of then Hauptsturmführer Wilhelm Mohnke that carried out the atrocity.



**SS Obergruppenführer Sepp Dietrich.**  
**Commander SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler**  
**Later promoted to Generaloberst in 1944**



**Hauptsturmführer Wilhelm Mohnke.**  
**Later promoted to SS Brigadeführer und**  
**Generalmajor der Waffen-SS**

In 1947, a number of survivors of the massacre returned to the scene, accompanied by officials from the War Crimes Interrogation Unit, following investigations undertaken by the office of the Judge Advocate General.

Despite the testimony of those that had survived this atrocity, astonishingly, it proved impossible to construct a sufficiently strong case to bring prosecutions.

Mohnke never had to face trial for any alleged part in the war crimes based on these hors de combat killings. He was captured by the Russians at the end of the war and spent ten years in Russia out of sight and knowledge of the Allies.

The Russians would not confirm if he was alive or not.

When he returned to Germany, the War Crimes Investigation Unit had closed down and all prosecutions were now the responsibility of Germany herself.

A number of alleged key witnesses were reported to have died on the Eastern Front, while others invoked the "SS Oath" and refused to talk.

In later years, a case was put to the German government but they refused to prosecute Mohnke. He strongly denied the accusations against him, telling historian Thomas Fischer:

*"I issued no orders not to take English prisoners or to execute prisoners."*

Mohnke lived to an old age on a rather good military pension - and died in August 2001.

Article 23c of the 1929 Geneva Convention stipulates:

*"It is strictly forbidden to kill or injure an enemy who has laid down his arms or has no remaining means of defence and has surrendered."*

Article 24d of the Convention also states:

*"It is forbidden to order that no quarter be given."*

In 1947, the old barn was knocked down, but a new one has been built in its place. Inside, the walls are full of poppies and wreaths. The villagers tend to it with love and devotion.



The field surrounding the barn, has now been turned into an area of remembrance, with headstones next to English oak trees, brought over after the war and planted there. A memorial has been built in the field.





Fifteen men survived the Wormhoudt atrocity.

The bodies of the murdered victims were buried in a mass grave dug near the barn. A year later, the SS, in an attempt to cover up the crime, disinterred the bodies and buried them in various cemeteries in Esquelbecq and Wormhoudt.

In 1947, the War Graves Commission erected headstones over the graves but as most of the bodies bore no identification, their ID tags and pay books being destroyed by the SS prior to the shootings, the names carved on the headstones bear no relation to the bodies buried underneath.



On 20th May 1973, a memorial was unveiled on the Esquelbecq-Wormhoudt road.



A few years ago, whilst on the Dunkirk and Atlantic Wall battlefield tour, I visited La Plaine au Bois and the barn.

I found visiting the site to be very emotional - and there was a very uncomfortable atmosphere in the barn. I found it hard to stay in there.

After walking in the fields and visiting the pond where two of the lads tried to hide before being shot, I walked back down the farm track and got back on the coach with my chums on the tour.



***The pond as it was in 1940.***

Inside the coach, there was complete silence. No one said anything for a few minutes.

The tour guide told me later, that this happens every time. It hits very hard.

Since that time, I often think about Wormhoudt – and how it made me feel on that day - and how it still makes me feel, all these years later.

So, I thought I would write it up and share it with you.

It's an appalling story. But one that has to be told.



To try and finish on an upbeat note, here is a picture of five of the survivors of the massacre, when they revisited the area many years ago.

Very brave men. Heroes to me. Every one of them.



***From L to R:  
Brain Fahey, Alf Tombs, Bert Evans, Charles Daley and Reginald West.***

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