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Lions of the Desert:

Arab Volunteers in the

German Army

1941-1945

by Antonio J. Munoz

2nd (Revised) Edition



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Lions of the Desert

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INTRODUCTION.

The origins of the Arab volunteer movement in the German Army date back to the failed Iraqi uprising of May, 1941. Hitler had always expended too little interest on the political and psychological currents prevalent in the Arab world. This explains why German intelligence was inadequate in an area which presented favourable opportunities because of friendly contacts of long standing.

The German Supreme Command was taken by surprise by the uprising in Iraq. In the diplomatic, propaganda, and military fields, Germany had neglected to prepare for just such an uprising in reply to British rule. The resulting command staff that was formed under General der Flieger a.D. Hellmuth Felmy, named "Sonderstab F," was a last-minute improvisation which could only take inadequate or half-boiled measures to aid the Arab world to fight British domination.

No firm Arab policy was ever developed which the staff, once formed, could have followed regarding the course of German political, military, and propaganda efforts in the Arab world. What resulted from this special staff ended with the use of what Arab volunteers there were, being used and accepted as substitutes for unavailable German combat

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personnel. In other words, the only good made by the Germans of this Arab connection was to count them as merely just so many more men that could be used in battle. The German-Arab 845th Battalion was just one such end-product of this result.

SPECIAL STAFF "F."

Slowly, the mission of Staff "F" changed, as the political and military options of Germany in the Arab world deteriorated to the point where the Staff itself was finally transformed into a regular corps' headquarters, and its subordinate specialized German-Arab formations were committed and squandered in regular combat, instead of being the organized spearhead of a joint German/Arab alliance against Great Britain in North Africa and the Middle East.

The ill-equipped and late blooming North African battalions formed in the spring of 1943 were destroyed by the Allied victory in that region, shortly after they had been formed, and were only good for coastal and rear guard watch duty. The better trained German-Arab Training Battalion, which had been in existence since July, 1941, suffered from a politically divisive war within its ranks, that was waged by three Arab factions.

One group of Arabs favoured Fauzi Kaiki, the Syrian military leader, while another sided with Rashid Ali, the ex-Prime Minister of Iraq. Still a third faction backed the exiled Mufti of Jerusalem, who was considered as the chief Muslim spiritual leader. The conspiratorial intrigues of these three factions did much to sap whatever cohesive force the Germans were trying to instill in the Training Battalion, and it wasn't until the Germans expunged the most fervent supporters of these clique circles, that the Battalion began to function as a whole unit. Again, lack of a proper German policy had also allowed these political groups to subvert the very military unit which was to represent the pro-Axis Arab world.

The cadre of the German-Arab Training Battalion was established in the town of Sunium, on the southernmost tip of Attica in Greece. There, permanent quarters were established, using the weekend villas there of wealthy Athenians, though the majority of the personnel ended up living in tents. The climate there was sub-tropical, and the initial batch of Arabs had no problem with this, since they had been raised in such weather.

Training of the forming battalion began almost immediately. The following statement describes the initial stages of training:

"Special Staff F and the Arab volunteers gathered

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at Sunium in July 1941. Training of the Moslems began almost immediately. The Arabs had a fair knowledge of German and showed themselves willing to learn. Unfortunately, they lacked imagination, and this made it difficult for them to understand the significance of the individual phases of a military operation. Quite a number of the volunteers could not understand why they should have to go through a toughening up process, although this is an integral part of military training everywhere in the world. The Arab attitude was that it was unnecessary to make a serious effort."

Another problem which surfaced very quickly was the mistake of using German instructors who had formerly lived in Arab countries. While at first glance these Germans, almost all of them quite knowledgeable in the language of the recruits, seemed the perfect candidates to train and become the German cadre of this Arab battalion, further experience showed that they had preconceived ideas about the Arab recruits. These ideas were that Arabs were a race of menials and shirkers. Soon this attitude crept up in the ranks and was detrimental to morale and training.

Another unit which was under the command of Special Staff F, was the all German Special Formation 288 *Sonderverband* (288), which had begun training on July 24th, 1941 in Potsdam and was geared for desert warfare. The structure of this unit was specifically geared for mobile warfare in the desert, and many of its German personnel had prior experience in the deserts of the Middle East and North Africa.

This unit was soon despatched to North Africa, as a support for Rommel's army. It was flown to Benghazi as a blocking force. It never returned to the control of Staff F, as it was eventually redesignated as Panzergrenadier Regiment "Afrika" and became an integral part of Rommel's Afrika Korps.

On January 26th, 1942 a Captain Schober assumed command of the German-Arab Training Battalion. The Arab volunteers were now issued with a specially manufactured cloth arm patch with the Muslim colors of Red, Green, White, and Black, and the words FREE ARABIA written in German underneath, and the Arabic translation written on top.

By April 1942 the Arab contingent in the battalion stood at 133. Quite a number of them had been former POWs who had served in either the French or British forces. They came from Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Trans-Jordan, Palestine,

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and Iraq. There was also a separate company which had been formed from former German members of the French Foreign Legion and was under the direct control of Special Staff F.

BELOW: Arm Shield of the German Arab Training Battalion ("Deutsche Arab Lehr Abteilung"), or D.A.L.



RED



GREEN



WHITE



BLACK



This unit proved to be hard to control and was soon disbanded and its men dispersed within the battalion. The original 30 Arab volunteers were not grouped together with the new batch of 103 Arab recruits, but formed a separate company which also contained Germans.

There was another German Special Formation unit (Sonder Verbände) which was formed a year later, on August 4th, 1942. This was Special Formation 287, which did contain Arab personnel as well as a German cadre staff. This unit was also known as the German-Arab Legion, and contained three battalions. Sonderverbände 287 was organized at Doberitz Training Grounds. It controlled two German motorized battalions (Ist & IIInd), plus the German-Arab Training Battalion (which had been at Sunium, Greece), and additional company-sized units.

The structure was as follows: I /Pz.Gre.Btl.287 (1-6th Companies); II/Pz.Gre.Btl.287 (7-8th Companies); III/Deutsche-Arabische Ausbildungs Bataillon (9-12th Companies); Pz.Jaeger.Kp.287 (Anti-Tank Company 287); Pz.Spah-Kp. 287 (Armored Reconnaissance Company 287); Assault Gun Battery 287

(formerly Assault Gun Battery 659); Rocket Launcher Battery 287; Light Engineer Company 287; Motorized Communications Battalion 287 (1-2nd Companies); and Supply Unit 287.

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The German-Arab Training Battalion, that is the III/Deutsch-Arabische Ausbildungs Bataillon had three companies made up of Arabs with German officers (although 15 of the original 30 Arab volunteers at Sunium had been promoted to officers). These comprised the 9th, 10th, and 11th Company of the Battalion. The 12th Company was the heavy weapons company, and was purely German in composition. In fact, the total number of Arabs in this battalion was a mere 392. On the whole, Special Staff F and its sub units had a total strength of 5,931 officers, NCO's and enlisted men.

EMPLOYMENT IN RUSSIA.

On 28 June, 1942 the Germans launched their summer offensive in the southern regions of the Soviet Union. By August 9th 1942 the first Soviet oil fields had been captured near Maikop at the beginning of the Caucasus region. Feeling useless, Special Staff F suggested to the German Army High Command that it be used in the Caucasus region. This suggestion was approved, since Allied air and naval superiority had so far prevented the employment of Special Staff F and its subordinate units from being used in North Africa. It was thus that beginning on August 21st Special Staff F and its sub units were dispatched to Stalino in southern Russia.

The 287th Special Formation was sent directly to Stalino from the Doberitz Training Grounds, minus the III/German-Arab Training Battalion, which was coming with the Special Staff F headquarters from Sunium, Greece. It arrived at Stalino at the beginning of September, 1942. On September 22nd, 1942 the Special Staff F was redesignated a "Corps Headquarters for Special Employment" (*Generalkommando z.b.V.*), and its members were allowed to wear a special arm patch (worn on the middle of the right arm sleeve). This patch was machine woven and depicted a tilted swastika at its base, with an oval wreath of palm leaves surrounding a palm tree and a rising sun behind it.

The new designation was in line with its new assignment at Stalino, which included among other things, a directive which outlined a training program that was geared specifically for desert warfare.

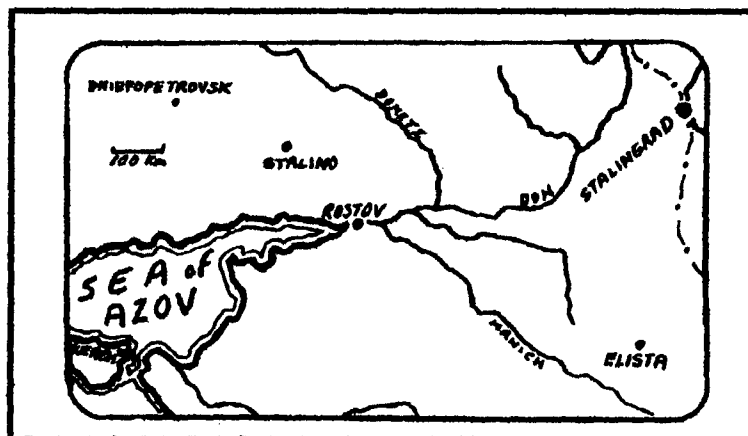
The directive stressed that the individual soldier had to learn to fight independently, and that training should include firing practice with various types of arms, reconnaissance, observation, and orientation by use of a compass. The Arab language was to be confined to phrases for everyday use and the essentials of military terminology. It was clear that the corps command still believed that it was

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going to be employed in the Middle East, perhaps by way of the Caucasus Mountains, once the German army had penetrated through it and into Iran.

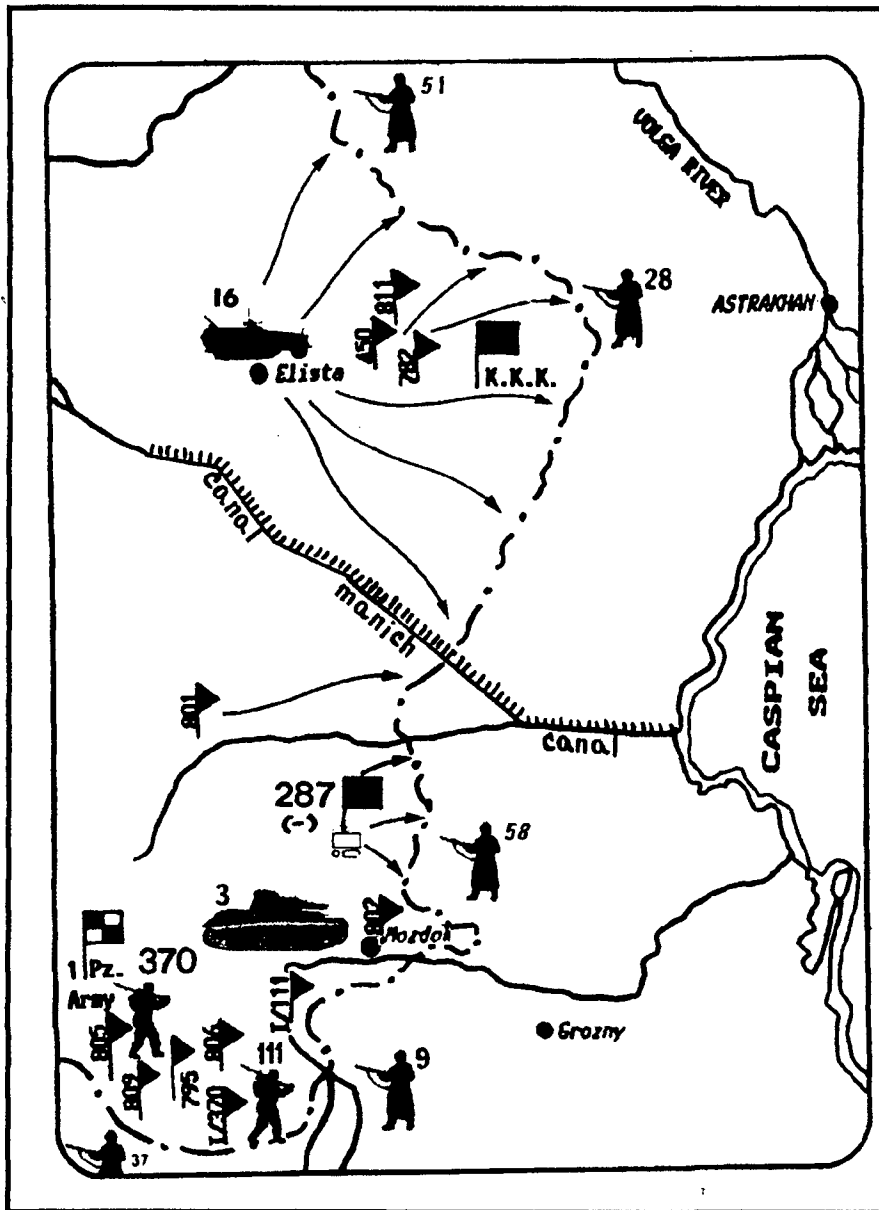
This plan was soon put in jeopardy when Army Group A bogged down on the north side of the Caucasus Mountains in September, 1942. The line separating both Army Group A in the Caucasus, and Army Group B in the Don River Bend & at Stalingrad had by now become quite long. It was for this reason that the Special Formation 287 was detached from the Corps' headquarters at Stalino on October 5th, and attached to 1st Panzer Army on the following day.

The plan now was to insert the 287th on the left flank of 1st Panzer Army in the area of Kuma between Niny-Stepnoe (XL. Panzerkorps) and the Manich Canal (where the 16th Motorized Infantry Division's southern-most mobile defense began). The main defense points turned out to be Acikulak and Urozajne on the Nogajer Steppe. By this time, the corps command had acquired 720 Ukranian *Hilfswilliger*, or auxiliary personnel. These Soviet citizens were recruited by the Axis forces (primarily the Germans) for such services as cooks, drivers, messengers, interpreters, etc. and it wasn't long before Felmy's special corps had their fair share of these "Hilfswilliger."

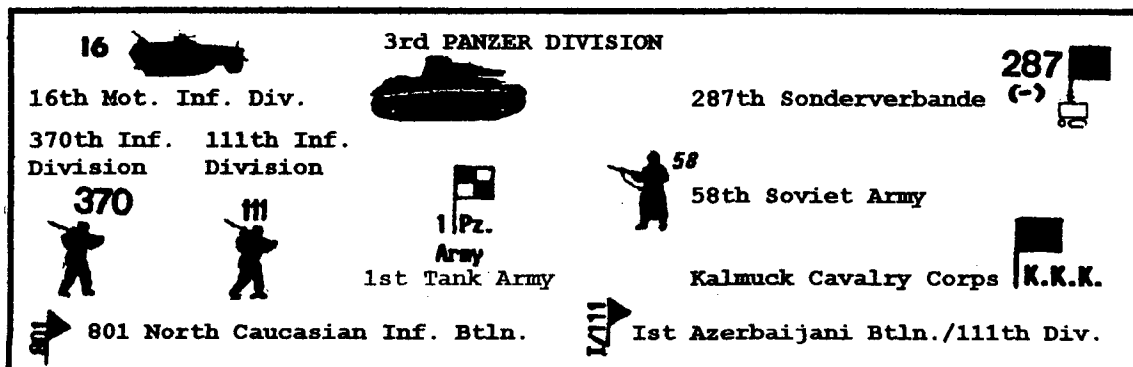


LEFT: General reference map of the area in question. Note the distance between Stalino & Elista.

The particular mission now assigned to Special Formation 287 had also been assigned to other auxiliary forces. Among them was the 801st North Caucasian Infantry Battalion (Captain Burkhardt), Special Formation "Bergmann" (Captain Dr. Oberlaender), and the Cossack Cavalry Regiment "von Jungschulz." For this employment, the Generalkommando z.b.V. had been detached from the German Armed Forces High Command on October 1st, 1942 and assigned to Army Group "A." The teletype message ordering the transfer specifically stated that the German-Arab Training Battalion was not to be committed to combat north of the Caucasus Mountains.



LEFT: Area of operations of Sonderverbande 287 (minus the German-Arab Training Battalion left behind at Stalino). The area between the 16th Motorized Infantry Division by Elista, and the 3rd Panzer Division (beginning by Mozdok) was patrolled by the 287th and other unconventional combat units.



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As the 1st and 11nd Battalions of the 287th Special Command [Regiment] were en-route to Army Group A, a number of the Arab volunteers in the IIIrd [German-Arab Training] Battalion came down with an unexpected case of the "flu." This was the result of continued intrigue between the two primary Arab political camps within the Battalion. The problem became so severe, that General Felmy himself paid a visit to the unit on October 5th, 1942 and addressed the Arab volunteers:

"I have received a report from your battalion commander, Captain Schober, that there is dissension and division among your ranks. This disturbs me greatly, as I have nothing but admiration for the fighting qualities of the Arabs. I remember specifically one attack which I witnessed while serving under the Turkish army, of an Arab unit at the battle for Gaza in 1917 which greatly impressed me. Their courage was noteworthy. Unfortunately, I am at a loss for words to understand the courage which I saw then, with the defeatism and dissension which I have heard is going on among your ranks. I am not here to urge you to fight for your Arab countries if you yourselves refuse to do so. All Muslim volunteers requesting to be separated from German military service will not be impeded, but I promise you that your names will be given to the Grand Mufti. He can deal with you as he sees fit. Furthermore your permits to reside in the Reich shall be revoked, and you will be asked to leave national territory immediately. I am going to allow you all to think over your decision until 1800 hours today, at which time every man here will be asked a simple 'yes' or 'no.' Your battalion commander, Captain Schober, will report the results to me personally, that is all."

Reports indicate that aside from those Arabs who were willing to quit at any price, most of the volunteers opted to remain in the battalion. The disgruntled elements in the battalion were sent to the German Armed Forces High Command Counterintelligence Branch under guard. Thereafter the unit returned to normal. Meanwhile, the 1st and 11nd Battalions had been dispatched to Budenovsk, in the beginning of the Caucasus region and assigned patrol duty between the left wing of the German 1st Panzer Army and the southernmost element of 4th Panzer Army (the 16th Motorized Infantry Division at Elista).

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The expected breakthrough into Iran never materialized during the summer and fall of 1942, but the Generalkommando and its sub units arrived at Budenovsk in mid-October, 1942, and just in time to repel a thrust by the Soviet IVth Cavalry Corps against the open flank of the German First Panzer Army. With short interruptions, the fighting continued for a number of months. When winter arrived, the Germans were completely bogged down in defensive fighting.



ABOVE: Emblem of the
"Generalkommando z.b.V."

Already, on November 8th, 1942 a combined US and British military landing in Morocco and Algeria was threatening to cut off Rommel's Afrika Korps from its bases in Tripolitania. The situation on the Russian front was not good either, as the Soviet juggernaut launched a massive winter counteroffensive on November 19th, 1942 that would eventually lead to the defeat of the German 6th Army at Stalingrad and the

destruction of many Axis armies operating in southern Russia.

The decision to shift the Generalkommando z.b.V. with its desert trained specialized units to North Africa had been reached as soon as the Allies had landed in North Africa, but due to the serious nature of the military situation in southern Russia, the only unit which was immediately shifted to Palermo, Sicily (for the expected transfer to Africa), was the IIIrd Battalion/ 287th Special Regiment (a.k.a., the German-Arab Training Battalion), which had not been committed to the Caucasus, but had remained at Stalino during the fall. In fact, so committed was the 287th to heavy defensive fighting, that the Generalkommando z.b.V. was similarly prevented from leaving Russia.

Transfer of the IIIrd Battalion/ 287th Special Regiment from Palermo, Sicily to Tunisia did not take place until January 1943. In order to retain some form of hold on the German-Arab Training Battalion while it was located so far away from its parent corps command, the Chief of Staff of the Corps, Lieutenant-Colonel Meyer-Ricks, was sent to Army Group South (in Italy) on December 7th, 1942 to keep an eye on the unit. As it turned out, Lt.-Col. Meyer-Ricks and Captain Schober would prove instrumental in raising several Muslim battalions for the Axis cause in North Africa.

In Vichy French Tunisia, the DAL (*Deutsch-Arabische Lehr Abteilung*, or German Arab Training Battalion) began to recruit hundreds of unemployed Muslims into several Arab auxiliary battalions. While the Vichy French government of

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Laval recruited Arab "labor" battalions to build fortifications, the Germans armed their Arab volunteers and gave them the less hazardous and less stressful duty of garrison or coastal watch duty. The "Freies Arabien" arm patch already discussed was freely distributed to these troops.

THE GERMAN-ARAB TRAINING BATTALION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.

As stated earlier, the German-Arab Training Battalion was ordered moved to Palermo, Sicily in December, 1942 but it did not arrive until January, 1943. The plan was to employ the unit in the Tunisian bridgehead. The Germans meanwhile had decided to activate a new command (formed for administrative reasons), which would be instrumental in recruiting new Arab volunteers from the parts of North Africa which were still Axis occupied.

This new command was named "Kodat", or Kommando deutsch-arabischer Truppen (Command - German Arab Troops). The German-Arab Training Battalion did not remain long in Sicily, as it was sent to Tunisia in January, 1943 to supervise the induction of the new Arab volunteers. One German explained the impression that these Arab volunteers had on the potential new recruits:

"The sight of Arabs in German uniform, wearing sleeve bands with the words 'FREE ARABIA' embroidered on them, had an excellent effect on the number of new enlistments."

Separate companies were now formed, along national lines. For example, the initial recruits were formed into three companies: a Tunisian, Algerian, and Moroccan unit. These companies were led by German officers and NCO's and each company numbered about 150 men.

The five (5) German NCO's in each Arab company were ex-French Foreign Legion personnel. The two drawbacks to these new Arab units were (1) the inadequate quantities of uniforms, arms, and equipment available to the new Arab volunteers; Many of which had to make do with ex-French Army uniforms and rifles, and (2) the very limited amount of time available to train them, since the military situation required that these Arab units assume rear-guard and coastal watch duty as quickly as possible, in order to free the more reliable and better trained and equipped German and Italian units for front line service.

The Vichy French government also organized Arabs, North Africans and French citizens living in the region into a volunteer force entitled the "Phalange Africaine" ("Africa Phalanx"). Command of this force was given to A Corsican

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Captain in the service of Vichy France, named Pierre-Simon Ange Cristofini. The French "Phalange Africaine" only managed to recruit 406 men, of which 132 were local Arabs in Tunisia. They wore the French colonial uniform with some wearing German helmets with a rectangular blue/white/red decal on the right side of the helmet. On February 13th, 1943 these 132 Arabs were removed from the Phalange and incorporated into the D.A.L.

BELOW: A German belonging to the Generalkommando z.b.V. and D.A.L.



There were two types of Arab formations formed- those for combat and guard duty and those which were to serve under the supervision of German engineers as construction units. The Arabs that were to serve as engineers wore a white brassard on their right sleeve with the inscription "In Dienste der Deutschen Wehrmacht" ("In the Service of the German Armed Forces"). In the back cover of this book, there is a photographic example of this, wherein an Arab is seen wearing a French colonial overcoat, wearing this brassard. Those that were earmarked for combat were given the "FREIES ARABIEN" emblem and employed in combat. In the case of one of these combat volunteers (as witnessed in a photograph) he clearly seemed to be an African.

While these Arab units were being organized, the German-Arab Training

Battalion guarded the coast of the Gulf of Hammamet from Cape Bon to Susa. While not much is known about the activities of the "Arab Legion," as the German-Arab Training Battalion was known in Africa, this much is known: During

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one night in the spring of 1943, the British landed an eight man commando team by submarine at Hammamet, in order to blow up the headquarters of Captain Fritz von Koenen's commando unit of the German Brandenburg commando.



ABOVE: A German NCO leads a machine gun squad of Arab volunteers in North Africa, 1943. When the German bridgehead in Tunis surrendered in April, 1943 most of these Arab volunteers went into captivity alongside their German comrades in arms. The Arab in the foreground is wearing a French Army tunic.

Von Koenen's command had led numerous successful sorties behind the Allied lines in Tunis and Algeria. The attempt was unsuccessful however, and within the next 48 hours, the entire eight man team was caught by the Brandenburgers and the Arabs of the German-Arab Training Battalion (whom the Germans also referred to as the "Arab Legion"). One of the eight British commandos, a captain, drowned while attempting to return to the submarine which had disembarked them.

There were other cases now where the various other German commands tried to make use of Arab volunteers. For example, the German 1st Parachute Regiment recruited 80-100 Arabs and gave them parachute training with the hope of using them

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behind the lines. Similarly, Otto Skorzeny, Hitler's premier commando employed Arab volunteers, but these shall be discussed later on. Suffice it to say that by mid-February, 1943 German weapons had arrived in Africa in sufficient quantities, and the Moslem companies were raised to battalion status. Organized were two Tunisian, one Algerian, and one Moroccan battalion, although they each included numerous other Arabs within these battalions, such as Senussi, Tuaregs, Egyptians, Syrians, Iraqis, and even desert Arabs.

On February 24th, 1943 disaster befell German attempts to organize more Arab volunteers when Lieutenant-Colonel Meyer-Ricks, the Chief of Staff of the Generalkommando z.b.V., and Captain Schober, the commander of the German-Arab Training Battalion, were both killed by low flying Allied aircraft. Because the Generalkommando was still involved in heavy fighting in Russia, no suitable replacements could be sent to Africa and as General der Flieger Hellmuth Felmy stated, the special circumstances surrounding these two extraordinary men damaged the recruiting and training schedule of the Arab volunteers:

"Although as a general rule the death of a commander did not result in the dissolution of a German military unit, in a case such as this where special conditions prevailed the loss could have serious consequences. Both dead officers had performed their duties well, and both spoke Arabic fluently. It was difficult to find other men who were as expert in the field of German-Arab relations. Finally, a Colonel von Hippel, who had seen service in the former German African colonies, was entrusted with the command of Kodat by the Fifth Panzer Army."

This had been the same Hippel whose command of the German-Arab Training Battalion later on, at Hammamet, helped to capture the British commando force. Meanwhile, the Generalkommando had been recalled back from the Russian front, but had left all of its units in Russia under the 24th Panzer Korps. The order for transit had reached the corps on 28 February, 1943. When the corps commander reported to Army Group South in Italy, he had to state that his corps could not be employed in Africa, given the fact that all of his sub-units, including all communications units, had been left behind in the Soviet Union.



ABOVE: Arab Volunteers of the African battalions, circa 1943.

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LIONS OF THE DESERT

In mid-April 1943, while the last battles were being waged in North Africa, some German personnel of the German-Arab Training Battalion, plus all of the Muslims who had finished their training, reinforced by some German ex-Foreign Legion troops, were consolidated into a battlegroup near Ferryville, in Tunisia. This ad-hoc battlegroup consisted of two rifle companies, and one heavy weapons company. The latter had one heavy infantry howitzer platoon (150mm), one 20mm anti-aircraft platoon, one 75mm antitank platoon, and one heavy MG-42 machine gun platoon.

During the following weeks this battlegroup was employed as follows:

"In the northern sector of the front, southwest of Mator and in the Sedeyenane Valley. It served as the tactical reserve of an Austrian division, and later with the 999th Light Africa Division."

In addition, the battlegroup was supposed to have been employed next to a parachute engineer battalion under Major Fritz Witzig. On May 1st it relieved a unit of the 1st Parachute Panzer Division "Hermann Goering," by repelling a US attack in their sector. Two days later it acted as rearguard for an German infantry regiment.

On May 6th, 1943 it was attached to, and formed the reserve of an ad-hoc Luftwaffe (German Air Force) infantry regiment which had been formed from ground personnel. The end of the battlegroup was as follows:

"On the afternoon of May 7th the group was to have assumed responsibility for the protection of an anti-aircraft unit established along the Bizerta-Tunis railroad. As the task force was about to move into position the anti-aircraft unit was overrun by American tanks. The following day the supply trains of the task force were disbanded, its records destroyed, and the remnants of the group, less than 100 men, assembled at Porto Farina, north of Tunis."

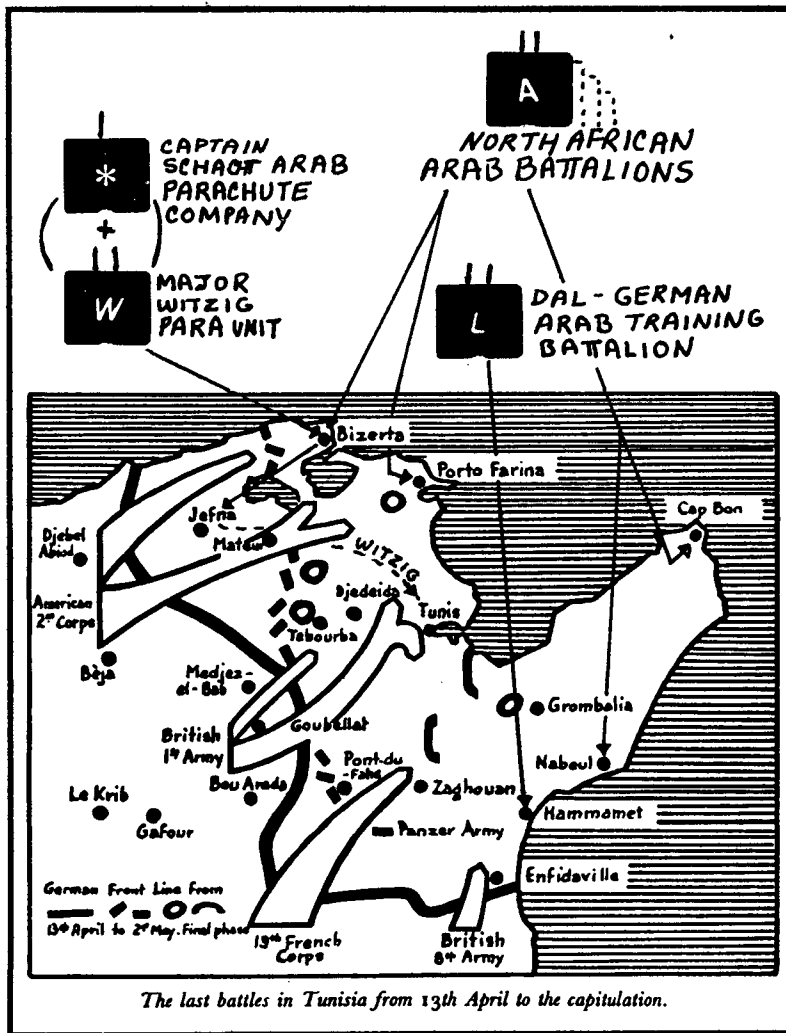
"Here from 4,000-5,000 other Axis soldiers waited in well disciplined ranks for ferries to evacuate them. The majority of the Arab soldiers in the task force remained with German troops and went voluntarily into captivity with them."

US records state that about 2,000 Arab prisoners were stationed in a US POW camp in Opaluka, Alabama as of April

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10th, 1946. This gives us an indication of the size of the German recruitment of Arabs in North Africa in just a few months' time. How many more Arab volunteers would have joined had the military and political situation been better is left to conjecture.

BELOW: Area of Operations of the Arab units in North Africa, December 1942 to April 1943.



ARAB PARACHUTISTS AND COMMANDOS.

During the period in which the German-Arab Training Battalion was stationed at the Gulf of Hammamet, a certain Captain Schacht of the 1st Parachute Regiment was appointed by Army Group South to train between 80-100 Arabs from the German-Arab Command (Kodat) for instruction in demolition and engineering work. For this reason they were transferred to the Wittstock Parachute School near Berlin.

There were others in the German camp who took an interest in the Arab volunteers and their potential as saboteurs and commandos. One was Otto Skorzeny, who between November 1943 and June 1944 trained 60-75 Italians, 20 Serbians, 15 Frenchmen, 10 Belgians, and 25 Arabs in the A-Schule (A School) established by the Abwehr in a country

estate between The Hague and Schevenningen, in Holland.

One such would-be commando was a Palestinian Arab named Fawzi el Kutub. Kutub had escaped Palestine in 1943 after getting into trouble with the British authorities. The then 25 year old Kutub was a follower of the Mufti of Jerusalem, who got him posted to Skorzeny's commando and sabotage school in Holland.

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After a year's training in the most refined techniques of sabotage and commando operations, he was ordered to lead a four man team of German saboteurs into Palestine. He refused and was immediately handcuffed and sent to a prison camp in Silesia, where he lingered for three months until the Mufti of Jerusalem was able to get him out, offering to give him a job in Berlin preparing Arabic propaganda for the Germans. In 1945 he was caught by the Soviet attack on that city and only managed to escape by dressing himself up as a wounded German soldier. He was caught by US troops near Salzburg, Austria and placed in a POW camp. He was allowed to return to Palestine. His most notable achievement being the destruction by bombing of the *Palestinian Post* building on February 1st, 1948. He figured slightly in the Arab-Israeli bombings and counter-bombings while the British still held a mandate over Palestine.

BELOW: Fawzi el Kotub, as he appeared during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, where he used his experience in explosives learned while working for the Germans.



But what of the 80-100 Arabs who went to Wittstock for parachute and demolitions training? Apparently his small Arab parachute company was used behind the Allied lines in North Africa with good results. Major Witzig's exploits included the delay of the US forces by blocking the Jefna tunnel pass, then advancing on to Sadjenane, further west. The Arab parachute company (under Captain Schacht), was used by Witzig's Parachute Engineer Battalion (which was later enlarged to become the 21st Parachute Engineer Regiment). These Arab parachutists had first to prove that (1) they had two years prior service in any army, and (2) that they had the stamina to complete the rigorous paratroop training given. Captain Schacht noted:

"The command (Kodat) was composed of Moroccans, Algerians, Tunisians, Senussi, Tuaregs, Syrians, Egyptians, Iraqi, and desert Arabs. Volunteers had to provide proof of two years of service in

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the army of their own country before they were accepted. Former French colonial troops mixed with Italian Sahara veterans, British trained colonial fighters of the Middle East countries, and Foreign Legion soldiers. One old sergeant had even served in the Turkish Army in World War I."

In December, 1943 another batch of recruits went through the commando course at the A-Schule, but this time it only included two Arab volunteers. To be fair, the class was rather small to begin with- two Italians, four Frenchmen and Belgians, and those two Arab volunteers. This course seems to have been an advanced course given to those individuals who were to handle the clandestine radio equipment, once the sabotage and espionage parties were to be landed behind enemy lines.

THE GERMAN-ARAB 845th INFANTRY BATTALION.

After the Germans lost the Swamp positions in Tunisia, there was no longer any opportunity to employ the Generalkommando z.b.V., which had been withdrawn from Russia. It was therefore decided that the corps' command would be redesignated as a motorized corps headquarters and on April 8, 1943 it was redesignated as the Generalkommando z.b.V. LXVIII (mot.)

The corps had no units of its own, say the 287th Special Regiment, and that unit was itself withdrawn and sent to southern France on March 15th, 1943 where it became the Grenadier Regiment 92 (motorized). This regiment became active on May 2nd, 1943 and was then sent to act as part of the occupation force in Serbia (Yugoslavia). In October, 1944 it suffered heavy losses during the battle for Belgrade, but was reformed on January 11th, 1945 as a motorized brigade.

With the departure of the 287th Special Regiment, the corps command was once again left without any unit of its own. The German-Arab Training Battalion was in Tunisia and could not be used any time soon by the corps. Nevertheless a Wehrmacht (German Armed Forces) High Command order dated 29 March, 1943 emphasized that the Generalkommando would continue to function as its field agency for all Arab matters:

"The pertinent order contained a paragraph to the effect that the Special Corps was to organize a staff to deal with all political issues and propaganda connected with the Moslem world. This staff

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was to serve with the German-Arab battalion."

When the corps command finally left Russia, it was diverted to Greece, where there was a need for a German corps' headquarters to run several smaller units. The corps arrived in Greece towards the end of May, 1943. Meanwhile elements of the German-Arab Training Battalion which had remained at Palermo, Italy while the bulk of the Battalion was employed in Tunisia, were ordered incorporated into a new Arab unit: the 845th German-Arab Infantry Battalion, a unit which was organized at Doellersheim Training Camp. This base was located north and northeast of Linz, Austria. The main camp was about 12 miles east of Zwettl, which was itself north of Linz and was an annex to the larger camp. Initially the new Arab battalion contained four companies.

The 845th German-Arab Infantry Battalion was now assigned to the Generalkommando LXVIII Armeekorps (mot.), which issued a training directive for the new battalion on June 30th, 1943:

"1. The Battalion is under the direct command of the Generalkommando. Initially it will organize into units all Arabs ready to serve the German cause and will train them in guerrilla tactics."

"2. For this purpose it will give the Arabs:

a. Basic infantry training,

*b. Training in teamwork for surprise raids
be carried out by squads and half-squad sized
units,*

*c. Training in demolition techniques (ranger
type training)."*

*"3. ...If possible squads should be composed of
men from the same locality."*

...

...

...

*"7. The battalion's 5th Company will be a para-
chute company. Lieutenant Rolf is appointed com-
mander of this company."*

...

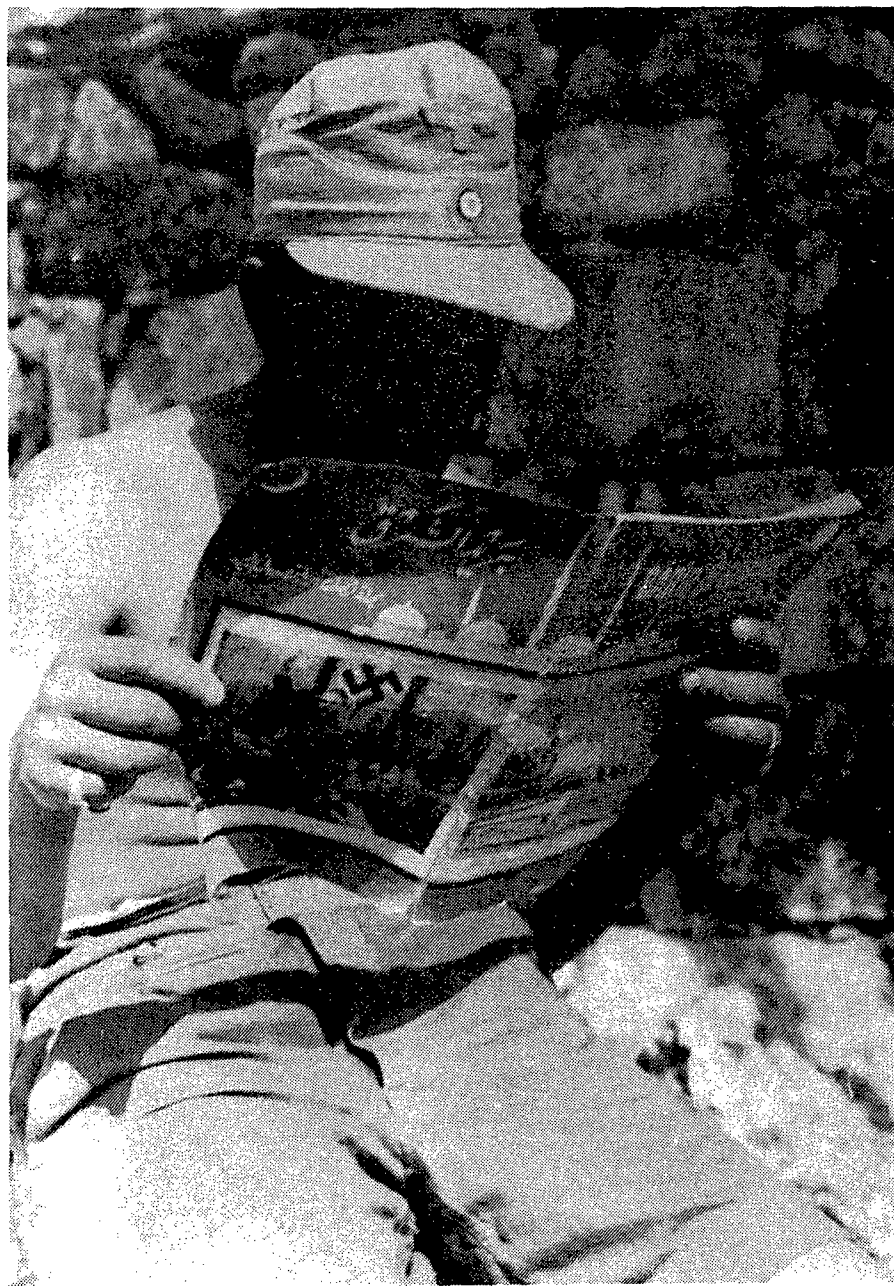
*"9. Also attached to the Generalkommando is the
'Arab Recruiting Center' (Westa) in Paris. At
present this agency is mainly an intelligence
agency."*

*"10. After its transfer to the zone of O.B. Sued
the battalion will be employed for guard duties*

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in addition to its normal training routine."

BELOW: An Arab member of the 845th Battalion reads the Arabic version of "SIGNAL", the German multi-language propaganda magazine, somewhere in Greece, 1944. Museum of Modern History, Ljubljana, Slovenia.



What is very interesting about this document relating the training and organizational layout of the 845th Battalion is that for the first time since Tunis, it mentions the Arab Parachute Company which had attached itself to Witzig's Parachute Engineer Battalion, and had been withdrawn to Rome, Italy just before the Axis collapse in North Africa. It shows that this Arab parachute company was attached to the 845th Battalion while in Greece.

Another aspect which becomes clear is that the new Arab battalion would still continue to train in what was obviously un-orthodox and un-conventional warfare techniques. This type of training would later prove to be ins-

trumental in allowing the Arab battalion to operate against

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the Greek (ELAS) Communist guerrillas with great effectiveness. The very nature of the Arab soldier allows for a terrific guerrilla fighter- one that is adept at using all of the tricks that other guerrilla movements employ. In the unorthodox fight that the Greek guerrillas waged, the Arab volunteers of the 845th Battalion seemed to have surpassed their Greek opponents at every turn.

The 845th German-Arab Infantry Battalion completed its training in November, 1943 and was posted to the Generalkommando LXVIII Armeekorps in the Peloponnesus region of Greece. There it came under the control of the German 41st Fortress Division. This division controlled numerous static, fortress, and garrison battalions and brigades, many of which were formed from the penal battalions of the German Army. There were small cases of desertion, as in the case which happened on November 19th, 1943 when three Arab members of the battalion deserted with their weapons, but overall the unit did not suffer from high desertions.

One source states that the 845th Battalion did not come under the control of the 41st Fortress Division until the spring of 1944, when it was transferred to the Lani region, with its base headquarters in Anfiklia, just west of Thebes. Its first large-scale anti-partisan operation occurred on April 7th, 1944 when the Battalion plus around 3-4,000 other German troops were employed against the 2nd ELAS Division, then operating in the Helicon mountain range, by the Gulf of Corinth.

One reliable source states that when the 845th Battalion arrived in Greece, it was initially given the responsibility for railroad security protection north of Salonika, under the LXXXXIst Army Corps, Army Group "E." The battalion stayed in this region near the Aegean Sea until its move to the Peloponnesus in the spring of 1944.

It was in the Helicon mountain range of southern Greece that the 845th Battalion proved its worth. As stated earlier, guerrilla warfare was a form of combat which seemed to suit the Arab mentality. A few typical examples from the experiences of Captain von Voss, the commander of the 1st Company/ 845th German-Arab Infantry Battalion, show the type of situation frequently encountered by German officers in their dealings with the Arab volunteers:

"One day, Ali ben Mohammed reported to the medical officer and requested to be hospitalized. The officer examined Ali and found him in excellent health."

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"'Why do you want to be hospitalized?' he said. 'You're not sick.' 'Others get into the hospital. Why can't I?' 'You are healthy and you're not going into a hospital!'"

"Ali turned to the door, which had a glass panel, and pushed his head through it. Covered with blood, and with pieces of glass sticking into his scalp, he faced the doctor and asked: 'am I sick now?'"

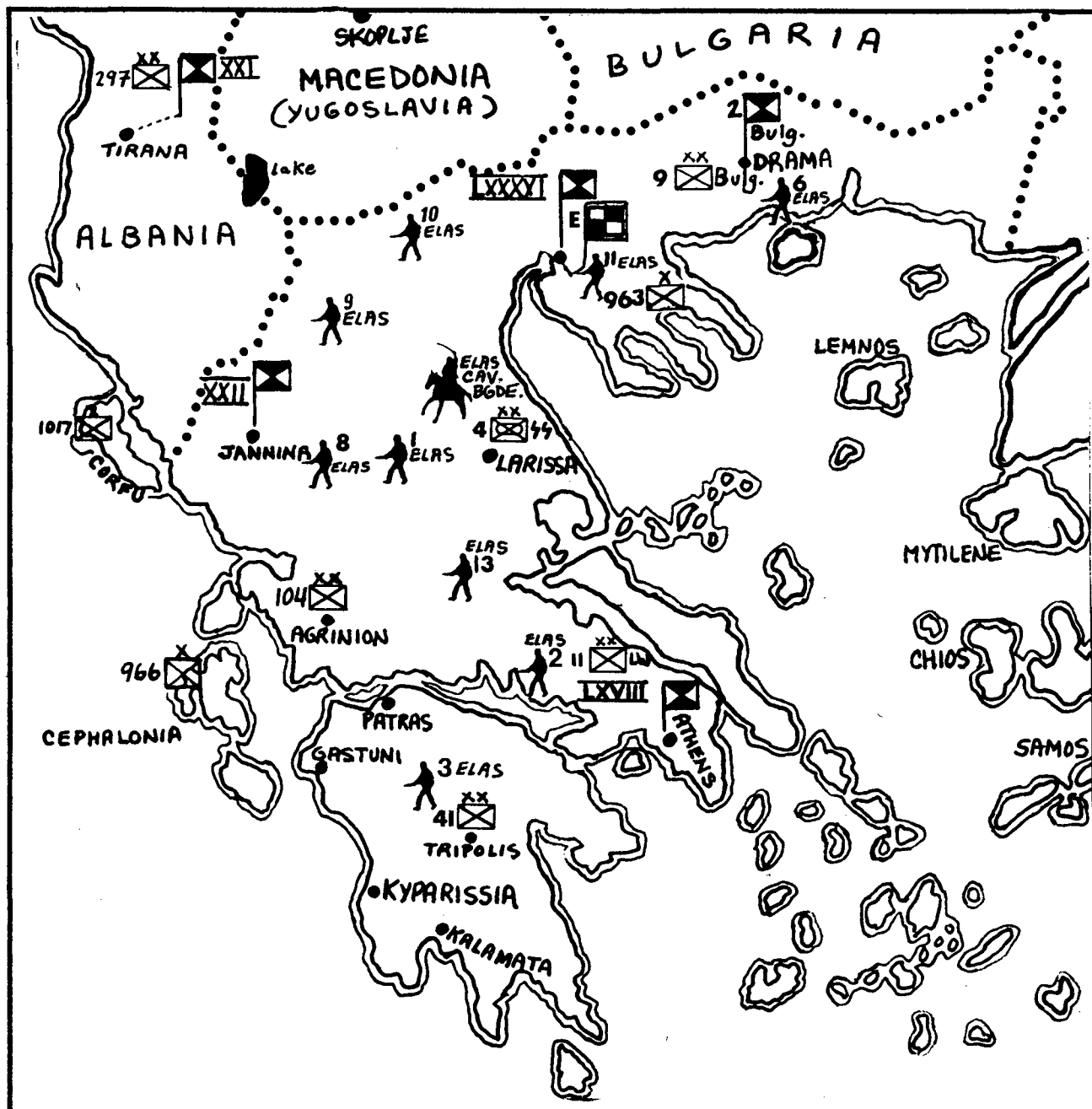
"On another day, the company was drilling. Everything seemed to be going well. Suddenly, one Machmut hurled his rifle away and flung himself on the ground. 'Ich nix Soldat!' (Me no soldier!) he cried. His friend Mabruk was so ashamed at Machmut's behavior that he drew his bayonet and gave himself five to six blows over the head with it, exposing the bone under his scalp."

"On another occasion two Arabs were teasing a soldier about his homosexual inclinations. That same night the soldier in question took his rifle, placed it behind the ear of one of his two tormentors, and pulled the trigger."

"During an action against partisans, Colonel von Eberlein, the commander of a security division, radioed that he was caught between two rivers. I told some of my Arabs, who were fond of the fierce old man with all his medals. All of them volunteered to go with me to the colonel's rescue. When we came to the river, they refused to let me wade across; they insisted on carrying me across on their shoulders."

My Arabs never filched any of my personal belongings, though as a rule they stole like magpies. They liked to stuff themselves with good food, they liked to get drunk, to loot and rape; but they also knew how to die bravely, *and they resisted pain remarkably well.*"

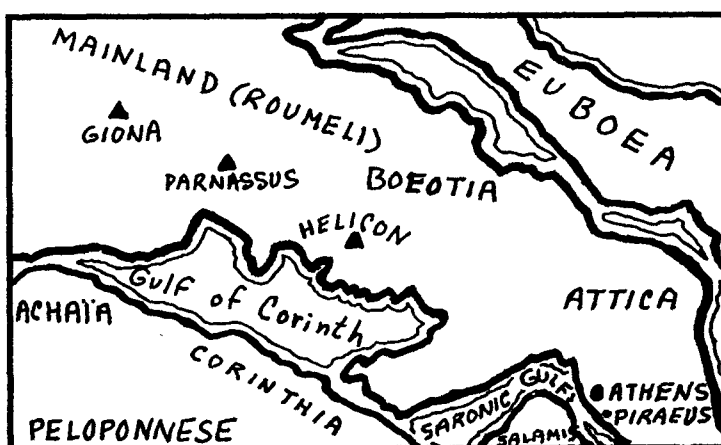
The German-Arab 845th Battalion was also instrumental in capturing some Allied agents who were assisting the Greek guerrillas, among them being Captain McGregor, who was caught in Monte Parnasso. But it was the Greek Communist Major-General Stefanos Sarafis who paid them an unwitting praise, when he singled them out amongst what were 2,500-3,000 Axis troops attacking his 2nd ELAS Division in Helicon in April, 1944:



ABOVE: Positions of the Generalkommando LXVIII Armeekorps (mot.), or 68th Army Corps (motorized). The Corps was initially located near the Athens area between June 1943 and October 1944, when it was withdrawn north. By November, 1944 it was under 2nd Panzer Army on the Drava River between Serbia and Hungary. The integral corps sub-units included the Arko 168, Corps Supply Troop 468, Corps Communications Battalion 468, and Corps Reconnaissance Company 468. While in Greece, the corps commanded several Axis units, including the 1st Panzer, 117th Jaeger, 11th Air Force, and 41st Fortress Division. This map is dated September, 1944.

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"Between April 7-11 a force of Germans, Battalionists, Italians, and **Moroccans** - about 2,500 men in all - tried to clear the Helicon district of ELAS troops. They landed from small craft in the Corinthian Gulf, in the Zaltsa and Ayii Saranda Bay, and after being reinforced from Thebes, Levadia and Amfissa, advanced towards Koukoura, Kyriaki, Distomo and Chostia. There was fierce fighting for four days at Kyriaki. Enemy dead and wounded: 250 including 45 Battalionists [Battalionists, were pro-Axis Greeks]. In these operations they pillaged and burnt houses and raped girls."



LEFT: General area of operations of the 845th German-Arab Battalion in April, 1944.

No doubt, some of the raping was done by the Arab soldiers in Captain von Voss's 1st Company (and the rest of the Battalion, for that matter). The recruiting of more Arab volunteers had never ceased. Offices were set up all over Europe and by a careful review of Allied POW's, many more Arabs came forward and joined the German army. It was in this way that a **second battalion** of Arabs was raised at Zwettl, near the Doellersheim Training Camp on September 1st, 1944. The training of this second battalion, designated the "II/Deutsch-Arabisches Infanterie-Bataillon 845," continued in the fall of 1944 in Zwettl, while the 1st Battalion/845th German-Arab Infantry Battalion was making a fighting withdrawal from Greece in October and November, 1944.

On January 10th, 1945 due to heavy losses, it was decided to disband this second Arab battalion and distribute the Arab personnel among the original 1st Battalion of the 845th. The German cadre personnel did not follow along with their Arab recruits, but were instead inducted into the

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reforming 48 Volksgrenadier Division. Another blow to the strength of the original 845th Battalion came in November, 1944 when about 100 of the remaining Arabs in the 5th Company (the one that was parachute trained), deserted en-masse from the unit and elected to join their old German commander from their battles in North Africa, Captain Schacht, who they heard was organizing a special parachute regiment for action on the eastern front.

BELOW: Major i.G. Schacht, who in early 1943 had led the Arab Parachute Company in Tunisia. When the war was coming to a close, his old Arab paratroopers rallied to his side and fought alongside him in front of Berlin. It is not known how many of these Arabs survived these last, fierce battles on the eastern front.



This new unit, led by the now Major i.G. Schacht, would eventually become the 25th Parachute Regiment of the 9th Parachute Division which would fight in front of Berlin during the last weeks of the war. Captain Schacht mentioned "his" Arab volunteers in a personal letter he wrote:

"...In November 1944, word got around that I had been entrusted with the activation of a Parachute Regiment for Special Employment. Before this month was over approximately 100 Arabs had deserted from their jobs with various staffs to volunteer for service in the new regiment. Under the leadership of the officers who had commanded them during the Tunisian campaign, they formed an extra company for the regiment. During the fighting in March and April 1945 in Pommerania and on the Oder marshes the Arab

company fully proved its effectiveness. In at least two instances I owed my life to the Arabs. Their losses were in proportion to their courage."

But what of the original 845th German-Arab Battalion? It was withdrawn from Greece in the general withdrawal of the German armed forces from that country in October, 1944. It followed the 41st Fortress Division as it moved from Larissa, to Bitolj, then Skoplje (in Macedonia, Yugoslavia), and on to Kraljevo. From Kraljevo, the Arab Battalion moved towards Uzice, and from there it headed towards Sarajevo in Bosnia.

In March and April, 1945 it was still fighting under the 41st Division (now redesignated as an "infantry" unit) just

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southeast of Vinkovci in Syrmia. Its higher corps command was the Generalkommando XXXIV. Armeekorps. In late April the battalion had been pushed back to Vukovar and ended the war under the 104. Jaeger Division, XVth Mountain Corps, Army Group "E."

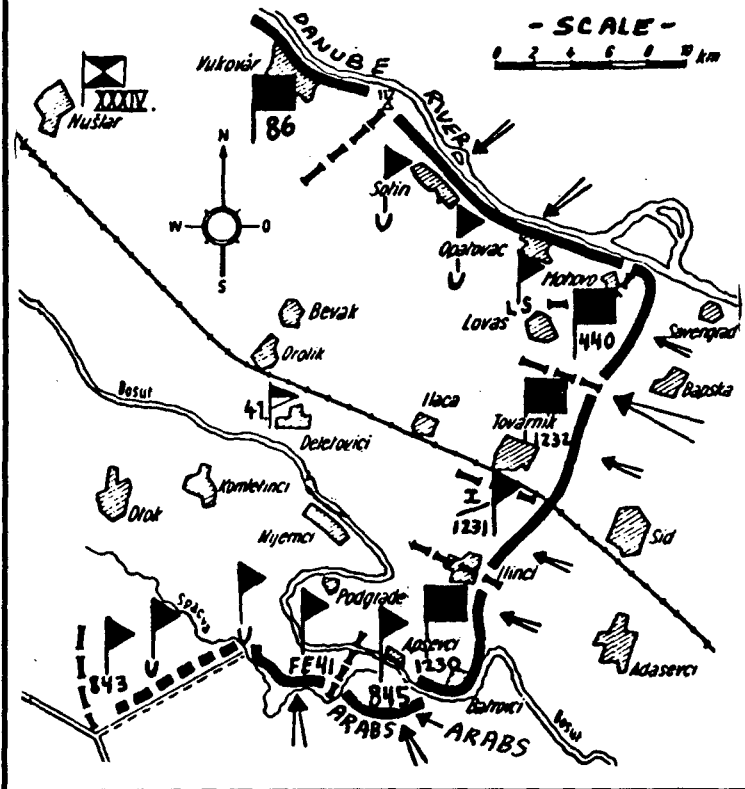
An estimated 500 Syrians, 150-200 Palestinians, 450 Iraqis, and perhaps 12,000 Moroccans, Tunisians, Algerians, Egyptians, Lybians, and desert Arabs joined the Axis between 1941 and 1945. About 6,300 of this number passed through the various German military organizations, while the rest served in the forces of Vichy France. They were a minute, though important contribution to the German war effort, and most importantly, furnished rolls upon rolls of propaganda film for the German war effort.

Their military contribution, with the exception of the German-Arab Training Battalion, and its successor, the 845th Battalion, was insignificant. Still, the contribution that the above two Arab battalions gave was noteworthy - especially in light of the Germans absence of an organized Arab policy, and the relatively short time in which the Axis forces were able to recruit volunteers from these Arab countries.

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One would imagine that the Allies courted the Arab peoples a lot better, and obtained better results, but the Arab participation on the Allied side was a conscriptive affair- one which sent an Algerian division to fight on the Allied side in Italy. This was the work of pre-war colonial conscription brought back to life. In actuality, there were far more "colonial" troops employed in the far east than were ever used in the North African or European campaign. In fact, the French under General Charles DeGaulle employed around 400,000 colonial troops during World War II. It is an interesting note to make, that in November, 1944 as the Allied newspapers were reporting that the first Allied

BELOW: Positions of the Arab 845th Infantry Battalion under 41st Infantry Division, April 1945.

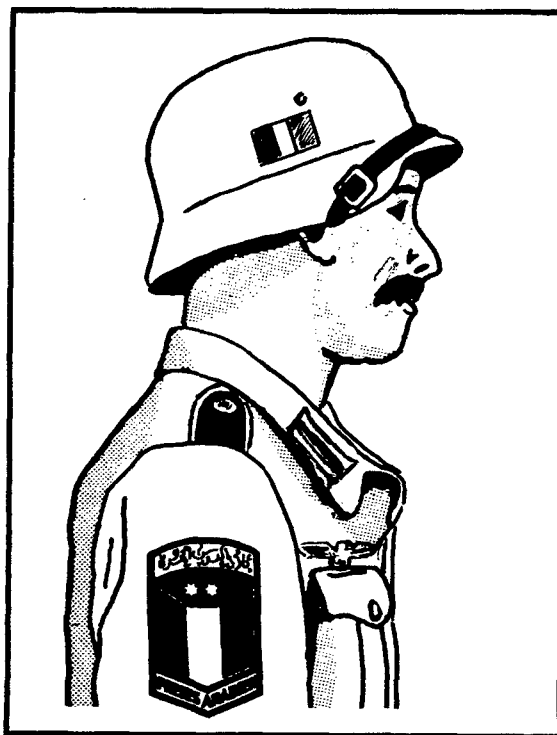


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divisions were entering the Reich, these same colonial conscripts were suddenly withdrawn from Europe and sent home. One author has speculated that the French wished to rid themselves of these "colored" units in order to show that it had been French soldiers who had delivered the final blows, but all of this is conjecture.

Suffice it to say that once they were no longer needed, this substantial colonial force was reduced and sent home. At the end of the Second World War, many peoples from third world countries expressed their desire to expel their former colonial masters and achieve true independence. Many of these were former members of the Allied colonial troops, who went on to take part in the struggle for their own country's independence. True independence was one right which the Allies were to deny the Arab world (at least until the war was over). For this reason, we can argue that the Allies did not have much to offer to these peoples. Many would counter by saying that the Germans, having racist policies, offered them less, but for the Arabs, it wasn't so much **what** the Nazis had to offer them, but **what would be destroyed** as a result of that Nazi victory.

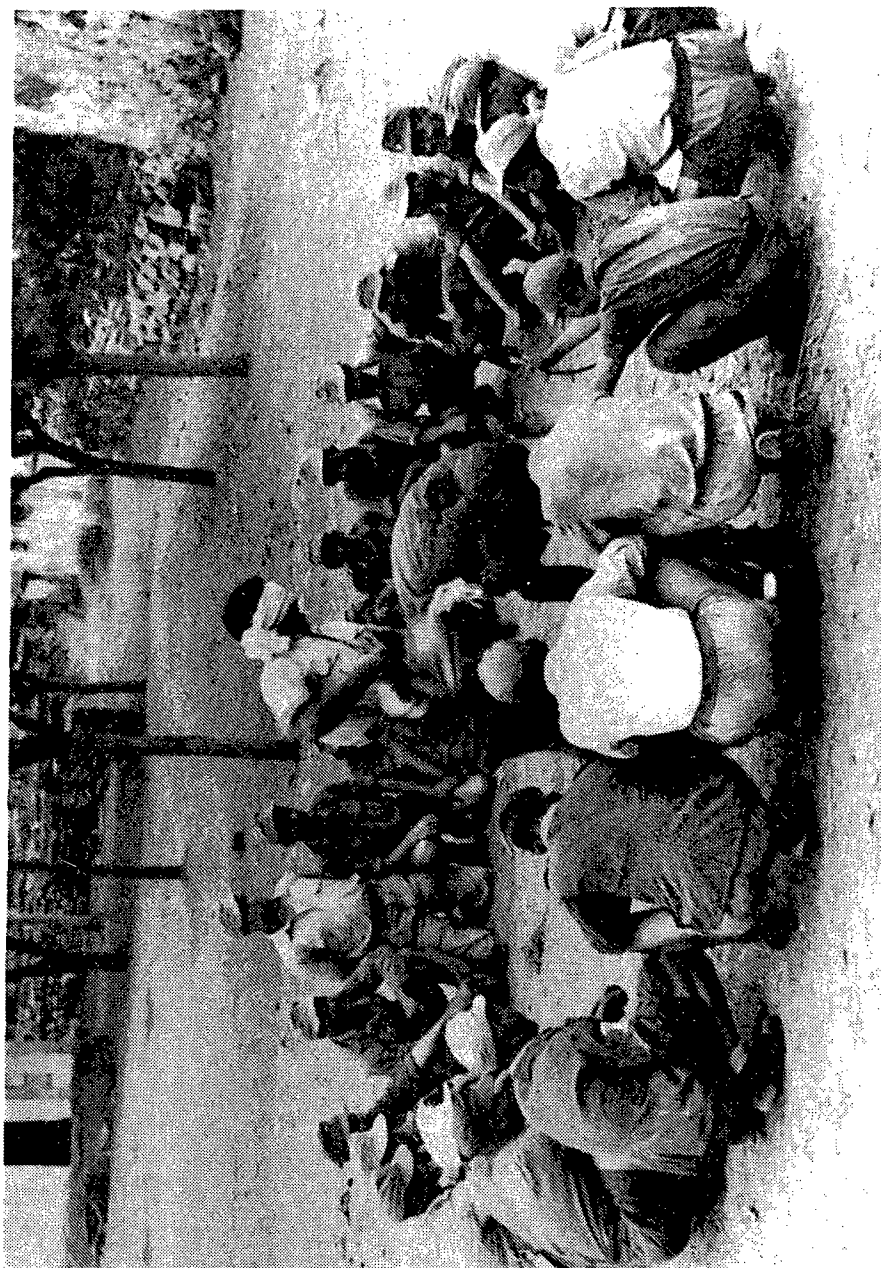
The End.



PHOTOGRAPHIC APPENDIX

BELOW: An Arab Squad of the 845th Battalion

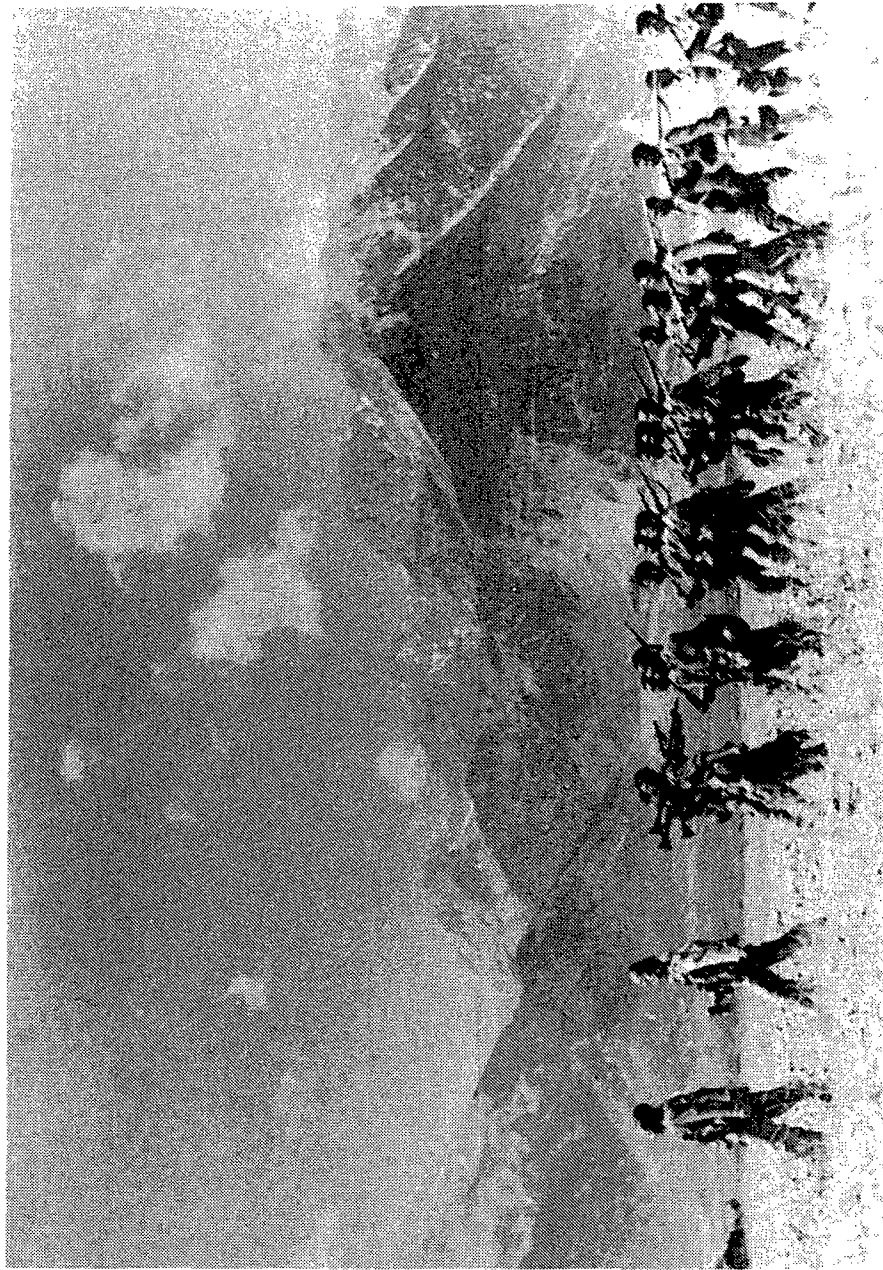




**Members of the German-Arab 845th Infantry Battalion
engage in blind man's wrestling - a popular sport
among the Arab volunteers.**



ABOVE: Morning inspection in eastern Croatia, 1945. You can see freshly fallen snow on the ground. Museum of Modern History, Ljubljana, Slovenia.



The 845th Arab Infantry Battalion showed amazing fighting prowess and esprit d'corps. In the background are the mountains of Greece.



The 845th Arab Battalion turned out to be exceptionally good at fighting the Greek and Yugoslav guerrillas. The very nature of guerrilla war gave itself to the Arab style of warfare. They were fierce fighters.



BELOW: Bugler for the Arab 845th Infantry Battalion. The red, white, green, and black arm patch is clearly visible on the right sleeve. Museum of Modern History, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

