

Historic Belgium Forces – Piron Brigade

The Belgian 1st Infantry Brigade, also known by the name of its commander as the Brigade Piron, was a Belgian infantry formation formed after the fall of France in 1940.



It began as miscellaneous elements from the European mainland, as well as Belgian military remnants which had crossed the English Channel. However, by the end of 1940 it had expanded to a "fusiliersbattalion", by 1941 it had been mustered as a pair of such battalions.

In January 1943 it assumed the official brigade designation. Various schemes were considered during this time for utilizing the brigade overseas, but it was decided to reserve it for the actual liberation of Belgium and its neighbouring countries of France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.

The Belgian 1st Infantry was famous as having the bulk of all Luxembourg army personnel who had fled to Britain following the invasion of their country. A group of seventy volunteers from the Army of Luxembourg had joined the brigade along with various other volunteers primarily from Belgium.

The brigade landed in Normandy in August 1944 and served with British 6th Airborne Division under the 1st Canadian Army.

NORMANDY:

The 'Brigade Piron' was landed in the very first days of August, at the same time as the Dutch Brigade 'Princes Irene' of Col de RUYTER van STEVENICK, the 2nd French Armoured Division, known as 'Division Leclerc', the Polish Armoured Division of Gen MACZEK and the Czecho-Slovak Armoured Brigade of Gen LISKA.

The British tasked the First Belgian Group (align with the Dutch Group) with the pursuit of enemy elements along the Norman coast, from the canal of the Orne to the Seine River on the left flank of the entire Allied Army in Normandy - a task to which the Belgians and Dutch, with their high degree of mobility and independent capability, were ideally suited. On August 3, the Brigade leaves its camp at Newmarket to go to Tilbury Docks. On August 4, the 500 vehicles of the 1st Belgian Group are loaded and the 2,200 men embark aboard four Liberty Ships (the Gladstone, the Paul Benjamin, the Henry Austin and the Finlay).

In the evening, the vessels sail and join the convoy which is forming off Whitstable, in the Thames' estuary. On August 6 at 0815hrs, the convoy leaves the port. On August 7 at about 1000hrs, the moment so longed for by the Belgian Group's soldiers finally arrives; the landing of the Group begins in Arromanches for vehicles, and in Courseulles for the men. Hardly had the Group landed when a long column formed.

The Brigade soon marched off and arrived during night at Douvres-la-Delivrande and Plumetot where it settled down in bivouac. The staff spends the night in Ranville castle. On August 8 at dawn, the Belgian Group is placed under the command of the British 6th Airborne Division of Major General Roy GALE which itself is part of the British I Corps of Lieutenant General CROCKER, which in turn is part of the 1st Canadian Army (General CRERAR). Colonel PIRON gets in touch with the 6th Airborne Division's HQ which is dug into lime quarries on the right bank of the Orne River.

The first mission of the Belgians is to be the reserve of the division, positioned on the left bank of the Orne. The vehicles of the Brigade Train are extremely welcome and are soon in action, transporting British and Canadian paratroops towards Pont-l'Évêque. On August 9 in the evening, the Group relieves the 4th British Special Service (Commando) Brigade. In front of them, are the German 272nd, 711th and 346th Infantry Divisions and elements of the elite 12th SS Panzer Division 'Hitlerjugend'.

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The trains of the Group are bivouacked in quarries near the Orne Canal and River Bridges (now famous as 'Pegasus' and 'Horsa' Bridge respectively). The staff settle down in Hauger's town hall. Forward, the three Motorized Units are deployed along the front line, with their left flank resting upon the swamps which line the estuary of the Orne. The Engineer Coy and the Armoured Car Squadron are in reserve. The Artillery Battery is deployed on the left bank of the canal. On August 13, the Group is in contact with the enemy in front of the villages of Sallenelles and Hauger.

The 1st Unit (Major WINTERGROEN) is pressed to the right on Amfreville, in contact with the 12th Devonshires (6th Airlanding Brigade) on their right. The 3rd Unit (Major NOWE) has its left flank resting on the Orne estuary. A part of the 3rd Unit is deployed forward at the entrance of Sallenelles, level with the school. The 2nd MU is in the centre, to the South of the road which leads towards Franceville. The border of the village is still in the Germans' hands.

All the region is continually observed by the enemy as they still occupy the dominant feature - the infamous Merville Battery (which was the scene of a very bloody raid by 9 Para on the dawn of D-Day). Approximately one kilometre to the rear, the Armoured Car Squadron is in reserve in the limestone quarries of La Basse carde. Lieutenant Colonel DERIDDER (the Artillery Battery) moves his position over the Orne to a position near Haute-Longueville (north of Ranville) and there redeploys his guns. The Brigade Train bivouacs along the river. The staff is settled in the City Hall of Hauger. Commandant PONCELET, the Brigade Chief of Staff, unfolds his maps in the property of the FABRE in Hauger. In the least uncomfortable room, Private LEBRECHT (Colonel PIRON's driver) unfolds his boss's campbed. Nearby, the Engineers are bivouacked in reserve in an orchard. The Artillery Battery bombards German positions for five days.



Staghound Armoured Cars
White Scout Cars & Daimler Scout cars of the Piron Brigade Formed up

Photo courtesy of <http://www.brigade-piron.be>

August 14, Belgian patrols encounter German patrols in the road from Sallenelles to Grande Ferme du Buisson (to the southeast). A grenade detonates next to Lieutenant Georges VAN DER VEEN (commander of the 5th Section of the 2nd MU) and he is seriously wounded.

An enemy patrol infiltrates between the 12th Devonshires and the 1st Unit. Lieutenant Jacques WANTY (2nd Section of the 1st MU) receives a bullet in the shoulder while Sgt DEWANDEZ is evacuated to the field hospital. In the 3rd MU, the young Private BASTIN, wounded during a patrol, is captured by Germans. He remains a prisoner for some days but manages to give them the slip and returns to his own lines. The first German prisoners are taken by the Brigade.

On August 17 at dawn, the first divisional Warning Order reaches the Belgian Group. The great day has come. The Belgians are going to attack at 0300hrs Their mission is to seize commanding positions which cover Franceville and Merville. The Colonel orders the 2nd and 3rd Units to send out strong reconnaissance patrols. That of the 2nd finds itself taken under heavy machine gun fire in the midst of a minefield. The younger REMOORTELE who commands it is killed and two other soldiers are wounded. The patrol succeeds in extricating itself thanks to timely support by the artillery.

The patrol of the 3rd Coy proceeds along the coastal road in the direction of Moulin du Buisson, but is stopped by enemy fire only 200 metres beyond the Belgians' advanced positions. At 0710hrs, the Attack Order for the start of 'Operation Paddle' (the offensive to clear the Germans from the land between the Orne and the Seine) arrives at the Brigade HQ. August 21 at 1100hrs, Belgian troops enter Cabourg, on the Dives, though its bridges are destroyed. The colonel sites his tactical HQ there while the 1st Unit crosses the river using various means.

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Daimler Scout cars of the Piron Brigade

Photo courtesy of <http://www.brigade-piron.be>

The 1st Unit then pushes beyond Houlgate and moves on to Auberville where it collides with a strong German rearguard. A patrol from Lt JACOBS' section, guided by a French patriot, Lt LEFEVRE, is ambushed and is taken under fire by four machine guns. Five men are killed (Cpl BETBEZE and privates BECKAERT,

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JADON, GURHEM and DE BOECK) as well as the lieutenant LEFEVRE. The chaplain DETHISE, who moved forward to help the dying and wounded, is wounded on his return and is later evacuated. During this time, the engineers work tirelessly, with the assistance of the local populace to establish a passage across the Dives.

Some jeeps eventually succeed in crossing the river and succeed in bringing provisions to the advanced units. At 0700hrs, a message arrives from General GALE, the 6th Airborne's Commander: "Congratulations to your advance". In the evening, the attack is led by the 1st Unit which neutralizes the first enemy positions without support of artillery. In the night, this company, strengthened by elements of the 3rd MU and supported by the artillery resumes the attack. Again, the assault is completely successful and the Germans withdraw.

On August 22, at dawn, the advance starts again. The light vehicles of the Group are now able to cross the Dives on a bridge built by the Belgian engineers. At 1300hrs, the Belgians enter Villers-sur-Mer where the Group receives a fervent reception from the populace. Everywhere, French, British and Belgian flags flutter, bells ring and the crowd shouts: "Long live Belgium! Thank you! Long live France!". In the evening, Touques is passed and Deauville is liberated. The Belgian Group is the first to have reached this river. General GALE summons Colonel PIRON to his HQ to congratulate him on the rapid progress of his Group.

However, the bridges are destroyed and German troops still occupy the Trouville Heights from where they bombard the Belgian positions with mortars and artillery. Two privates of the 1st Unit: ROUCHE and FOURNIER are killed in front of the ruined bridge. The artillery and the heavy vehicles, having crossed the Dives by the heavy bridge in Troarn, arrive in Deauville. The HQ of the Brigade settles down in a farm captured by Belgians. On August 24, at 0830hrs, the Colonel gives the order to recommence the advance and to push aside the enemy.



Photo courtesy of <http://www.brigade-piron.be>

MK 1 Daimler Scout car of the Armoured Car/Reconnaissance Squadron

With the bridge over the La Touques destroyed, the infantry crosses on its rubble, carrying weapons and ammunitions while the population brings building materials to the engineers, who hurry to build a bridge capable of taking vehicles. This time, the 3rd Unit forms the avant garde. The advance continues with difficulty. However, German resistance starts to weaken. Numerous prisoners are taken. The Belgian Group is now 8 km ahead of the rest of the division. However, due to the bridging difficulties, the transport and baggage is obviously not able to follow. By the evening, the Belgians is at the gates of Honfleur. It will enter the town the next day.

At dawn on August 25, the infantry penetrates deep into Honfleur, but is stopped at Fiquefleur by automatic and antitank fire. The Belgian infantry is soon joined by the the armoured cars of VERHAEGE's Troop, who provide vital supporting fire wih their machine guns.The Germans abandon the Fiquefleur Heights. The pursuit starts again near Berville and Foulbec. There, the avant-garde is stopped by enemy fire from the Heights dominating the Risle Valley.On August 26, General GALE decides to launch the Armoured Car Squadron towards Pont Audemer to cut off the retreat of the German rearguards.

At 0815 Hrs, Lieutenant D'OULTREMONT who's mission is to tempt an action on Foulbec's bridge sees that the bridge is destroyed. The Squadron comes under fire from the enemy, who are camouflaged on the heights overlooking the Risle. However, support was on the way, as Colonel PIRON had at dawn, sent the 3rd Motorized Unit out in front of the Group, on the axis Honfleur-Berville-Foulbec. The Unitmoves up through Conteville and arrives at the Squadron's position. However, almost immediately, they come under intense enemy fire. Practically the entire company is pinned down, with some soldiers being wounded.

Private MOUCHET is killed here and will be buried in the village.In the evening of August 28, the Belgian Group receives the order to cross the Risle at Pont Audemer and dig-in in Corneville's orchards.On August 31, the Group receives its orders. It will cross the Seine under the protection of the 49th Recce Regiment. It will regroup to the South of Yvetot and will then march on Le Havre and contact the enemy.



Brigade HQ



Brigade HQ car being repaired

Photo courtesy of <http://www.brigade-piron.be>

The crossing of the Seine is made in several places. Three passages by rafts with engines are organized at Caudebec and up-stream. The Armoured cars will cross on the first rafts, just after nightfall. Colonel PIRON accompanies Captain BLOCH, the liaison officer, on the first raft. The operation is very slow and lasts until the evening of the next day. The Squadron arrives at its crossing point at 1800 Hrs, but has to wait for work to be carried out by the British Royal Engineers.

At 2100 Hrs, the squadron crosses the Seine at Mailleraye. This operation lasts until 1000hrs on the next day. The Staff crosses at Caudebec at 1100 Hrs, followed by the Artillery Battery. The trains of the Brigade cross via the intact railroad bridge at Rouen, further upstream. On September 1st, the crossing of the Seine having been very slow, it is only at midday that the march on Le Havre can begin. The Armoured Car Squadron spread out and screen the advance of the 1st Motorized Unit. Soon, they reach Bolbec and Harfleur. The Germans have established their outposts along the edge of the deep valley which leads down to the city. However, they are easily overrun. However, the western heights are strongly defended and furnished with concreted bunkers. The Tactical HQ is established between Caudebec and Lillebonne.

The motorized units and the artillery are ready to commence the attack when abruptly, the General BARKER meets the Colonel PIRON at about 1800 Hrs. PIRON is given new orders : During the night, the Group will be relieved by the 49th Division and will then group together, ready to move at dawn on the next day.

On September 02, Colonel PIRON is summoned to Lyons-la-Forêt. In the afternoon, the armoured cars leave Saint-Romans for Yvetot. Colonel PIRON leaves Valliquerville at 11 o'clock. The order is given to move to Arras. The Campaign of Normandy is over...

The brigade had advanced to Le Havre by the beginning of September and participated in the liberation of the Côte Fleurie. It was then transferred to the British Second Army and advanced to Brussels.



Armoured Car/Reconnaissance Squadron

Photo courtesy of <http://www.brigade-piron.be>

September to October '44:

Initially, both brigades were earmarked to spearhead the assault into Le Havre, but the orders were cancelled and the brigades were transferred to the Guards Armoured Division (British XXX Corps) for the liberation of France and Belgium. However, the brigades soon went their separate ways, with the Dutch going into Holland with 43rd (Wessex) Division, 50th (Northumbria) Division and 8th Armoured Brigade (all belonging to XXX Corps with whom the Dutch remained until the end of the war).

The Belgians stayed in Belgium during much of September to complete the liberation of their country alongside 15th (Scottish) Division and 8th Armoured Brigade. The Belgians were sent once again to the front on 22nd September, being attached to British VIII Corps on the right flank of 21st Army Group (except for the Artillery Battery and Armoured Car Squadron, who remained with XXX Corps). On 29th September, they were transferred to the US XIX Corps, 1st US Army (which was temporarily part of 21st Army Group), and had a detachment of US Shermans, Stuarts and Tank Destroyers under command, led by one Lt Col Elms (US 7th Armoured Division?).

Attachments for both brigades in this period could therefore be extremely varied - including all manner of British units and US armour (for the Belgians) or US Airborne (for the Dutch).



Photo courtesy of <http://mailer.fsu.edu/~akirk/tanks/greece/greece.html>
Daimler Scout car in the marking of the Royal Netherlands Brigade - Princess Irene - Brigade
reconnaissance battalion

November '44 to March '45:

Withdrawn from the line in November, the brigade reorganized, expanded, and re-entered the line with the First Canadian Army in April, but with its 2nd Battalion detached to Walcheren Island

The Belgians returned to the British VIII Corps on the 1st, being placed under the command of 53rd (Welch) Division. They returned to Belgium on the 17th, for a period of training and expansion to full brigade strength.

The 'Princess Irenes' remained in the Netherlands throughout the winter, engaged in extensive patrolling and skirmishing, including an unpleasant period spent on 'The Island' (Bettuwe), north of Nijmegen.

The Dutch followed the rest of 21st Army Group into Germany in February and March '45. Attachments for this period would largely consist of British infantry, possibly with some tank support, involved in patrolling and probing missions (and countering those of the Germans) in very soggy terrain.

April '45:

The Belgians returned to the war as a full, reinforced infantry brigade (as British infantry brigade organisation, with organic armoured cars and artillery).

On 4th April, they were placed under the command of 51st (Highland) Division (Canadian II Corps). On 10th April, Brigadier Piron was ordered to detach his 2nd Infantry Battalion and his artillery, which was to come under the command of 4th Special Service Brigade.

Later that month, the 2nd Battalion found itself being passed from pillar-to-post, being attached variously to 116th Royal Marine Brigade and 33rd Armoured Brigade (Kangaroos and Buffaloes).



Photo courtesy of <http://worldwar.be/forum/viewtopic.php?f=16&p=6732>

Daimler Armoured Car

Unload of the vehicles, Daimler armoured car are brought to rampart



Photo courtesy of <http://www.brigade-piron.be>
MK 1 Daimler Scout car of the Piron Brigade





Photo courtesy of <http://worldwar.be/forum/viewtopic.php?f=16&p=6732>
Daimler Armoured Car and Staghound, On the way to vat L' Eveque. Major the Selleirs talk with lieutenant Grosjean, second lieutenant Totelin sits Right in the Daimler.



Photo courtesy of <http://worldwar.be/forum/viewtopic.php?f=16&p=6732>
Daimler Scout car in the marking of the Royal Netherlands Brigade - Princess Irene - Brigade reconnaissance battalion



Photo courtesy of <http://www.brigade-piron.be>



Photo courtesy of <http://www.brigade-piron.be>

Vehicle Markings - Brigade Piron.

The Dutch and Belgian Brigades both used the same system:

The vehicle badge of the 1st Belgian Brigade was theoretically a black shield, with a red 'St. George's' cross and a gold lion's mask.

However, in practice, the vehicles actually displayed a large capital 'B' in white, painted on the front and rear left of the vehicle. Neither of these designs seem to have been worn as a sleeve badge, however, which was simply a black-gold-red Belgian tricolour. A black-gold-red roundel was also painted on the centre-rear of the vehicles

Brigade HQ -- 109 in white on black square

Brigade Signals Company -- 109 in red on white-over-blue square

1st Independent Fighting Unit -- 110 in white on red square

2nd Independent Fighting Unit -- 111 in white on red square

3rd Independent Fighting Unit -- 112 in white on red square

Reserve & Training Company -- 113 in white on black (?) square

Artillery Battery -- 114 in white on red-over-blue square

Engineer Company (Belgians only) -- 115 (?) in white on light blue square

Supply Company -- 116 (?) in white on blue-over-red-over-blue square

Repair Company -- 117 (?) in white on red-over-yellow-over-red square

Transport Company -- 118 in white on red/green diagonally-divided square

Armoured Car/Reconnaissance Squadron -- 138 in white on blue-over-green (?) square



Photo courtesy of <http://www.brigade-piron.be>



1^{RE} BRIGADE BELGE

CAMPAGNE DE Normandie
CITATION

A L'ORDRE DE LA BRIGADE

S/Cpl. Chouaol Décret 2928
du Belgian Lmd. Car Regt.

Chef de Scout car dans les campagnes de Normandie et de Belgique, a montré un courage et une efficacité hors pair.

Se 23.8.44, à Fiquelma, s'est délibérément exposé à un violent feu de mitrailleuses ennemies, s'est habilement dérobé au feu d'une arme anti-tanks et a rapporté de cette mission des précisions complètes sur le dispositif ennemi.

Se 1.9.44, par une manœuvre habile et audacieuse, a forcé l'ennemi à dévoiler l'emplacement d'un canon de 88 mm.

LE COLONEL B.E.M.
JEAN PIRON D.S.O.

J. Piron - CDT.



DSC F207187[1] Photo courtesy of Simon Hamon



DSC F0000 De Brigade samen met mannen van 6th Airborne Division in het Orne bruggehoofd.

