

## Spanish Republicans in the Liberation of Paris

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*24 August 1944: at 21.22 hours several half-tracks and a Sherman tank (the 'Romilly') reach the square outside the Hotel de Ville in Paris; they represent the vanguard of the Allied armies. The snouts and flanks of these lead vehicles are daubed with unforgettable names from the civil war in Spain: names like 'Madrid', 'Jarama', 'Ebro', 'Teruel', 'Guernica', 'Belchite', 'Guadalajara', 'Brunete' .. and 'Don Quijote'. These vehicles belong to No 1, No 2 and No 3 sections of the famous IX Company (even the French refer to it as La Nueve) of the Chad Regiment. In charge of them are Martín Bernal from Zaragoza, Federico Moreno from Madrid, and the Andalusian Montoya, abetted by the Catalan Elías (wounded on the streets of Paris by a sniper), Campos from the Canaries and Domínguez from Valencia. Together with the rest of the crews, they make 36 men who had served in the Spanish Republican army. The detail is made up of the four Frenchmen crewing the 'Romilly': they can rightly be described as the men who liberated Paris.*

"The first armoured vehicle to reach the Place de l' Hôtel de Ville – as Moreno tells it – was the *Guadalajara*. This vehicle, with a crew made up entirely of Spaniards from Extremadura, would also be the first to make for the nearby Rue des Archives once word reached us of a hotbed of German resistance there. But the first shots fired by the Allied forces in Paris came from the *Ebro* under the command of Campos from the Canary Islands and driven by Bullosa, a Catalan." In their armoured vehicle the *Fort Star*, Alfredo Piñeiro and Paco Izquierdo were patrolling the side-streets off the Champs Elysées and around the Arc de Triomphe. Izquierdo was left dumbfounded when, in between the usual kisses and hugs, he was told by a girl: "You're the first French soldier I've ever kissed!" Pineiro told me in Barcelona not so long ago that he was the one left to repeat what they had been saying over and over again ever since reaching the outskirts of Paris. "We are Spanish reds!" even as they unfurled the tricolour flag of the Spanish Republic which fluttered from the turret of every one of their armoured cars. "That's just the way it happened" – Captain Dronne, commander of the Nueve confirmed. – "Where they got those flags from I have no idea, but, yes, it actually was the flag of their home country and nobody raised the slightest objection."

The fact is that this was not the first time – nor the last – when Spanish republicans set the tone – and not just in the French army. Martín Bernal has every entitlement in the world to hammer home his point: "Why – in a situation unparalleled in all of the Second World War Allied armies – when the Nueve took delivery of a batch of brand new armoured vehicles at the camp in Hull east of Liverpool, a delegation of Spaniards applied to their commanders for permission to baptise the half-tracks just delivered to them with names of their own choosing."

The Spaniards had held a meeting – a noisy one as one might readily imagine and came up with names enough – ranging from 'Pasionaria' to 'Durruti', not forgetting the initials of the POUM – for a thousand armoured vehicles. Until the section commanders (Moreno, Granell, Elías) decided to play safe and endowed them with the names of Spanish civil war battles. "My own" – Moreno announced – "we dubbed the 'Don Quijote', that being the part we had all been acting out ever since we had left our homeland. The actual inscription of the names was entrusted to the man among us with the best handwriting, Antonio V B Clarasó from Reus, aka *Bamba*, a former pupil of the renowned highschool Institución Libre de Enseñanza (Free Institute of Education) and the Nueve's quarter-master in charge of ammunition.

We were the ones of course – who else would you expect? – who invented the

black market in German prisoners", the Valencian Domínguez points out. General Eisenhower had granted some of his commandos *carte blanche* – the ones from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Regiment among others – but had banned his regulars from crossing the river Loire.

Leclerc's II Armoured Division was fighting in that sector at the time. The Americans made a competition out of capturing enemy troops, not merely to set new records for the combat units – as if this was some sort of a sports competition – but because in so doing they earned all manner of distinctions and above all special leave by way of reward. Since Leclerc's men, especially the Spaniards who took to Leclerc's free-style approach to combat like ducks to water and whose half-tracks were forever in the van, were able to criss-cross the Loire and venture across the river as often as they felt like it, a trade grew up whereby prisoners were swapped for war materials or other goods from army stores.

The prisoners were supplied by the II Armoured Division as well as by sweeps carried out in the battle zones through which Leclerc's armour passed. Battle zones in which Spanish republicans were nearly always serving and it was to them that the light war materials for which prisoners were traded were steered. So intense did this trade in captured Germans become that it was not long before a suitable sliding scale was worked out: for five soldiers, the Americans used to pay one 20 litre jerry-can of gasoline; for ten, it was two jerry-cans or a couple of pairs of canvas-topped boots.

Gasoline was – back then – the basic unit of exchange. After it would rank machine-guns – one for every twenty captives – and some of these weapons finished up in the guerrilla campaigns in the sierras of Spain, and so on. Ordinary soldiers and NCOs could only be bartered for equipment or light arms. But three staff officers could get you a motorcycle. And if those staff officers happened to be SS, a side-car was thrown in. A German general and the Americans handed over an all-terrain vehicle (jeep).

The haggling was usually conducted in a weird English-French-Spanish pidgin and involved a 'sweetener' in the form of cans of tinned beef, chewing gum packets, packs of 'blond tobacco', flasks of whisky or the odd tyre. The actual exchange, which called for incredible ingenuity in that the American and French high commands did not take kindly to it, was such fun to the Leclerc Division personnel that sometimes they would hand over to the guerrillas everything that they had obtained from the Americans in exchange for prisoners taken in the fighting, with no 'margin' for themselves.. "The army of the master race had fallen very low" – Cortés confessed to me one day in Barcelona – "and we took plenty of revenge for what they had done to us during our war in Spain."

Occasionally, the staff officers and generals were only staff officers and generals in terms of the uniforms they were wearing, having been promoted by the Spaniards from the *Nueve* so as to bring a higher price. The hardest to fake were the sinister SS, because German regular army troops would rather have been skinned alive than don a uniform with those two fateful letters stitched into the lapels.

In certain cases – such is life! – the exchange went something like this: five soldiers brought in 20 litres of gasoline in return for which a farmer might hand over a couple of fat hens. Or three staff officers equalled one motorcycle which was worth one pig or two sheep ..

The Leclerc column's Spaniards, from Group M and Force L – which is how what would later come to be called the II Armoured Division was once known – were drawn from three specific locations: from the ranks of the French Foreign Legion's XIII Semi-Brigade, from the *Corps Francs* (French army commandos) and from the punishment camps in N. Africa, especially the ones in the Algerian desert.

In the XIII Semi-Brigade, the Spaniards (accounting for nearly 50% of the complement of about two thousand men) played an outstanding part in the Norway campaign (April-June 1940), especially in spearheading the Allied offensive – designed to interrupt the supply line of Swedish iron ore (shipped by rail to the terminus in the Norwegian port of Narvik) – with a force of Spanish

legionnaires under the command of the Galician Gayoso occupying Hill 2230. Previous attacks on that hill by French troops (*chasseurs alpins*), British troops, Polish and indeed Norwegian troops from the Norwegian VI High Mountain Division had foundered; it was defended by a number of German automatic weapons and lay inside the Arctic Circle and barely 300 kilometers from the North Pole. Hence the nickname "Norwegians" given to our countrymen there where the average temperature in the spring of 1940 was 30 degrees below zero; to the astonishment of the inter-Allied command, theirs was the unit that suffered fewest frost bite victims.

That was only one of the feats of the Spanish in Norway. As the Arctic night fell the Spanish details used to post numbers of look-outs on recently captured positions - with shorter than regulation tours of duty, one hour at a time: whilst the rest would fall back and spend the night indoors. "And what if the Germans counter-attacked and snatched back the positions?" I asked Serapio Iniesta, one of the XIII Semi-Brigade veterans. "Then the look-outs fell back in turn and alerted their comrades. And before daybreak we had shifted them again at bayonet-point. It was that simple", Iniesta replied.

In his history of the French Foreign Legion, Georges Blond confirms the Spaniards' outstanding performance: "The influx of a large contingent of Iberian political exiles was unprecedented in the legion's ranks. Disciplined, long-suffering, subjected to tough training in the Algerian desert, they had to get it across to certain French officers overly fond of ancien régime regulations that the time for corny jokes and gratuitous mockery (such as references to Spanish republican units as the 'rope-soled sandals army') was over."

There were also plenty of officers who distrusted them, dismissing them as 'communists' and announcing that it had been a mistake to include them in the French Expeditionary Corps to Norway. However, events were to show that these Spanish reds or ex-reds could fight like lions. In light of the German invasion of Belgium and Holland (10 May 1940) and the threat now looming over French soil, the French high command (dubbed by humorists - not without reason - the "periscope-less submarine") decided to bring the French Expeditionary Corps home from Norway.

Evacuation took place in early June. No sooner were they back in England than the news broke of German troops having entered Paris (14 June) and the XII Semi-Brigade was dispatched hurriedly to the last remaining foothold in Brittany which proved to be yet another pipe-dream of the French command. They arrived just in time to witness the incursion of German motorised columns into the Breton peninsula and were obliged to hot-foot it back to England.

So when De Gaulle entrusted Leclerc with the problematic retaking of a number of French colonies for the Free French government recently established in exile, cavalry commander De Hautecloque (Leclerc's real name) had to muster what was left of the naval infantry, the *chasseurs alpins* and the Foreign Legion (based at Trentham Park), to which were added several detachments of Central African irregulars (some 3000 men in all, 1 in every 6 of them a Spaniard). This was the first operation mounted by General De Gaulle to reassert French sovereignty and authority in the African territories of Cameroon, Chad, Gabon and Niger and to organise armed forces capable of holding and running those colonies.

The fantastic thing is that, despite the predictions of the politicians and high-ranking military well versed in such matters, Leclerc managed to pull this off - this and much more besides - and he never forgot that from the start (October 1940) through until Hitler's Eagle's Nest in Berchtesgaden was overrun (May 1945), he was always able to rely on his Spaniards.

Julián Villapadierna from León-Asturias, , one-time commander of the 'Z' Services of the Spanish Republican Army, told me one day when we were both living in exile in France that, having been seconded (during the French campaign in 1939-1940) to the French army's firing range in Vierzon, he had had to organise training for a substantial team of Corps Francs volunteers, with a dozen of our own countrymen among them.

The Corps Francs were guerrilla units designed to operate behind the enemy lines, usually mounting sabotage or guerrilla attacks. As a former revolutionary fighter from Asturias (where he had been a national schoolteacher in Cangas de Oniz) and thanks to the specialist courses he had taken on behalf of the Z Services in Spain during the civil war, he was a past master in the field. In 1942-1944 we had occasion to witness this for ourselves in the Aude-Ariège-Pyrénées Orientales guerrilla triangle.

#### *Voluntary Transfer*

When the armistice was signed, following the humiliating defeat of the Allied armies, in France in June 1940, what was left of the Corps Francs was evacuated to the French colonies in N. Africa. When the Allied landings came there in November 1942, the Corps Francs were resurrected and reincorporated into Free France's military deployment.

Although a few Spaniards (such as Captain Miguel Buiza, one-time admiral of the Spanish republican fleet) stayed on with the Corps Francs, the fact is that the vast majority of the Corps Francs Spaniards (talked round by their comrades from the Leclerc column) went AWOL and enlisted with the II Armoured Division which was being put together. Spaniards referred to this decision very cheekily as a *voluntary transfer*. Some Spaniards from the Foreign Legion, from the main base in Sidi-Bel-Abbès in Algeria, also decided to transfer to Leclerc's unit.

A recruiting drive was mounted by motorized flying squads of Africa campaign (October 1940- May 1943) veterans: prominent among these was Campos from the Canaries who wangled a jeep, three lorries, army gasoline vouchers, rations and passes out of the US North Africa Command with a promise to recruit thousands of Spaniards into a shock division to be placed at the disposal of the Allies.

"The whole thing could have backfired" - says Federico Moreno, "because when they caught on that recruits were being driven to Morocco, where the II Armoured Division was being organised and kitted out, the Americans made a number of complaints to the French high command. But when it transpired that they were soldiering for a commander as eccentric as Leclerc, the matter was allowed to drop. They were birds of a feather. One of the most precious recruits - drawn from the Corps Francs - would be Major Putz, an Austrian who had served in the International Brigades and who was to perish in action in October 1944 as the Leclerc Division marched on Strasbourg."

Other recently recruited Leclerc-ists were Spaniards freed from punishment camps in the Algerian desert, (out and out death camps those were) eager to take up arms again against European fascists and Nazis wherever they were. And so these Spaniards came to be known as "Norwegians" or "Africans".

The Corps Francs in which French and Spaniards fought side by side would join the I Armoured Division under the command of General De Lattre de Tassigny and were the backbone of the French Expeditionary Corps in Italy, with which men from the French Foreign Legion's XIII Semi-Brigade (the "Norwegians") served; the survivors among them were drawn from French Equatorial Africa where they had left Leclerc after capturing Chad and part of the Cameroons.

Later, they joined the British Expeditionary Corps in the African colony of Sierra Leone. From there, rounding the Cape of Good Hope, they landed in the Sudan (another East African British colony) from where they took part in the reconquest of Eritrea before moving on to recapture Syria and Lebanon in the Near East for Free France. That was in June 1941.

Then the XIII Semi-Brigade was overhauled again (in Alexandria in Egypt) and seconded to the British Eighth Army under General Montgomery under whom they served up until the German and Italian armies had been run out of North Africa in May 1943. And that was after they had featured in the heroic resistance at Bir-Hakeim (May 1942) and met up with Leclerc's Spaniards - arriving from the heart of Africa - in January 1943, in the Libyan capital, Tripoli.

Other Spaniards - more politicised and older men - were to make clandestine landings along the coast of eastern Andalusia, especially around Almería, seeking

to re-establish contact with anti-Franco resistance groups (armed and otherwise) operating inside Spain. Some of these militants - ranging from libertarians to Catalanists - had been commissioned by the Allied command to sound out their respective hosts about the chances of their backing (militarily and politically) an Allied landing in Andalusia or Catalonia.

Differences of opinion between the British led by Churchill who wanted a landing on the European shores of the Mediterranean to be mounted in the Balkans, Europe's underbelly, and the Americans who gave very serious consideration to one on the Iberian coastline, may well have been the deciding factor in the choice of Italy (starting with Sicily) as the European theatre of operations against the Axis powers, pending the opening up of what the other member of the 'Big Three', Stalin, regarded as the real second front: the landings in France, initially on the Normandy coast (6 June 1944) and later on the shores of Provence (15 August 1944). In the history of the successive units commanded by General Leclerc, the Spanish republicans always stood out on account of their very idiosyncratic ways: they were brave, but hard to command "though not to handle", as Leclerc himself was to make clear; disciplined, but stropky; loved a joke even in the tightest spots, exemplified esprit de corps, were selfless and dreamers and, betimes, unbelievably foolhardy ..

But this was so because Leclerc himself was a bit of a maverick, an 'anarchist' soldier in the loosest sense of the word. That was how he was described to me by *Bamba* from Reus in a pleasant, amusing conversation (at the Paris headquarters of II Armoured Division veterans) with several other countrymen of ours who had served under Leclerc.

So: did the Spaniards somehow 'shape' Leclerc's modus operandi? And, beginning with those early skirmishes in the open desert in southern Libya, were they not nearly always the ones that aided and abetted him in his coups?

One has only to chat with his former officers and commanders - the very people who lived with him around the clock - to come to that conclusion. One of them, who saw all sorts of French servicemen at close quarters during the battle for France (1939-1940) admitted that the Leclerc-ists were like creatures from another galaxy. Which was not the case with De Lattre de Tassigny's division in Italy, France or Germany: "That was a real bore", I was told by Millán Vicente from the XIII Semi-Brigade. "That unit resembled a monastic order .. suffice to say that even we legionnaires, with our records, couldn't quite loosen them up. Which says it all."

The first coup was to ensure that the French tricolour flew over the furthest reaches of France's African possessions and that Charles De Gaulle was seen by all and sundry as the supreme leader of Free France, even if, in order to accomplish this, Leclerc had to engage bishops like the Bishop of Douala in heated arguments, or Generals such as Giraud who was for a time the military figure most touted by the Americans as a replacement for De Gaulle.

The wooing campaign mounted by the Canaries-born Campos and by other Spaniards also helped ensure that Giraud never had the personnel he was counting upon to raise an army of his own under the aegis of the Americans. In the attack upon and overrunning of the Mareth Line we can see the extent to which Leclerc relied yet again upon his men to mount an operation that came after repeated failures by the British and New Zealanders to break through that Line.

Whilst Leclerc was planning this operation against the Mareth Line, the New Zealand general Freyberg was stunned to hear the Frenchman say that he was off to reconnoiter on his own, by jeep along with a driver, in the dead of night "because my men need their rest", he stressed.

Within days, on a brief stop-over in Zaguan in Tunisian territory, the very respectable English commander of an anti-tank unit placed at Leclerc's disposal in Gabes was singing the praises of the French general and his men to General Freyberg, no less, before asking to be reassigned to a unit made of God-fearing men.

The second coup was his escape using desert trails and the planting of the French liberation flag in the villa in Menzuan. When this came to the attention of the British High Command it was initially thought to be an error in transmission. Because how could Force L (i.e. Leclerc) be leading the way when it had been assigned to rearguard duties?

Leclerc and his men turned up two days after that as the first troops into the holy city of Kairuan and they drove the Afrika Korps from the Zaguan massif and pressed on as far as the capital: Tunis. Thereby highlighting Free France's leading part in the liberation of that French colony.

These and other coups were to raise fears that his unit's postings, first to Sabratah (Libya) and then to near Rabat, in Morocco, might condemn his men to rot whilst hopelessly waiting their turn as the Anglo-Saxons liberated France.

As General Giraud and his supporters were cold-shouldered and under relentless pressures brought from De Gaulle, who in Leclerc had his finest standard-bearer in every respect, the Americans decided to deliver the promised armoured gear to the eccentric French general and this was done in late 1943 and early 1944 at the Teamara camp south of Rabat. "The fact of the matter is", *Bamba* wrote us, "that by then we had decided that they meant to dump us there until the war was over, even though, as I told you in one of my letters, there was no let-up in our intensive drills and maneuvers so that we would be ready for action at a moment's notice."

#### *The Allied command "chastises" Leclerc*

Leclerc went so far as to lobby De Gaulle to post him to the Italian front, but the latter told him: "Patience, dear friend, patience. You are to liberate Alsace and Lorraine .. after Paris, of course."

Sometimes De Gaulle played the dreamer too, because during the early months of 1944, Leclerc's popularity with the inter-allied high command had fallen very low. But with the support of the Canadian government and Canadian general Georges Vanier in particular, the dogged Free French leader managed to have the II Armoured Division selected as the force representing France in the Normandy landings.

Yet six months on from that great, longed-for day, the French general was still being kept out of the loop. All he knew - De Gaulle repeatedly gave him such advice - was that he had to be patient and keep his chin up. For a few months he managed it. There was no shortage of people sniping at him. In the knowledge that Leclerc would pull out all the stops rather than miss his opportunity and that, had he found out in time, the II Armored Division's commander might have stolen a march on the rest of them .. and landed on his own, with just his own men.

Time and again, before 1944 was out, on French soil and on German soil by spring 1945, Leclerc was to prove that those who had flagged up the chances of such a dangerous eventuality - a go-it-alone landing - were not too wide of the mark.

Chastisement by the Allied command was plain furthermore when the II Armoured Division set sail for England in early April 1944: arrangements were made for his men and equipment to be shipped across in separate convoys, with intervals of several weeks between them.

Despite phone calls and visits from De Gaulle - first in Swansea and later in Hull, when he found that he had no option but to trek across half of England with his equipment, manifestly taking it further away from the south coast, and despite the efforts of his associate Colonel Langlade to pacify him, Leclerc lashed out left, right and centre because he had to move 240 tanks by road and because his repair unit was still in Morocco.

In order to pre-empt a serious incident if Leclerc were to stick his oar in, Langlade himself tackled the Americans, they being the ones directing the overall operation. The recipient of the French protest was an American colonel from No 4 Section of the Allied High Command who, once he had had his tongue-lashing, exclaimed: "I have never come across a French officer capable of expressing himself so well in English and using more discourteous language!"

Despite all the difficulties, the Division reached Hull without the slightest mishap. But it would be 20 May before the last of the II Armoured Division's gear, blockaded in Casablanca, reached England. Day after day, Leclerc worked on the outline of how the unit should operate in France and Germany.

"We must be ready for anything, at a moment's notice and no matter how unforeseen the circumstances. I want my men to feel that they have back-up in every circumstance. No matter how tough the fighting may be, I want communications, medical assistance and a repairs service as close as possible to my men. And gasoline too, Langlade, gasoline. Give a high priority to gasoline. I don't want to see a single vehicle halted due to lack of fuel. And inculcate the crews with the requisite spirit of enterprise so that, even when cut off from the rest of the unit, the men from each armoured vehicle make up a tightly knit team capable of reacting positively on the hoof."

Days prior to embarking for France (late July 1944), by which time the Anglo-American forces had been fighting on the soil of France for nearly eight weeks, Leclerc gathered his men together one last time in England:

"Now take careful note of my instructions, gentlemen. Let me emphasise: note them and study them well, because I do not think that there is anything or anyone capable of altering our course."

One Africa veteran piped up:

"We've watched you fighting for years, general, and that is something that is not easily forgotten."

"Combat is one thing and tactics another, my friend, and when we have the German army ahead of us I won't always be there in among you as I was in Africa. So keep this in the forefront of your minds: first, any enemy resistance must be overwhelmed and surrounded and we must head straight for our targets without being distracted. Secondly, we have to find the enemy's weak spot which must be tested across a broad front, thanks to our mobility, punch a hole through it and pour through with no time to waste. And thirdly, strike deep into the enemy's rear and destroy any reserves we come across, sowing confusion everywhere."

"And if we encounter resistance in the enemy's rear?"

"Then, as always, we must maneuver, maneuver endlessly, bearing in mind at all times that armour is essentially a weapon dependent on speed, capable of adapting and operating in all terrains. Always keeping an eye on our flanks, to be sure, but without being afraid of being spotted in the open in that the mobility of armour means that it can at a moment's notice redeploy to a new front in an instant. Remember that there is only one tactical principle: inflict the maximum amount of damage, dead and wounded on the enemy in the shortest possible time and not expose oneself stupidly to his fire."

Leclerc and his men landed in Normandy on the night of 31 July-1 August 1944. The II Armoured Division was to operate as a support unit: that is, it was anticipated that it would intervene only once the enemy front had been ruptured.

The Americans' intentions were far from clear - they had printed off French banknotes for the Allied occupation forces without the least consultation with the Free French - so De Gaulle and Leclerc alike had to rack their brains to ensure that they would not be side-lined completely in the liberation of France.

In the wake of the ferocious battle of Eccouche, Leclerc's armoured vehicles turned towards Paris. But first they sent off this brief and rather unorthodox dispatch to De Gaulle:

"Following a flat-out and somewhat convoluted progress that has taken us from Avranches (Normandy) to Le Mans, we mounted a direct attack towards the north and in four days reached the river Orne between Eccouché and Argentian. Our attack, outflanking a number of German divisions, has proved an outstanding success."

"My impression of that time is that it was like a re-run of the days of May and June 1940, but in reverse: a stepping up of our infiltration efforts inside the enemy's lines, surprise detachments and an ongoing scattering of the enemy's

resources..

Our American neighbours, especially on our left flank, were, as ever, lagging behind. The outcome of these attacks might have been fantastic had the decision been made to seal off the Argentan-Falaise corridor. But the command formally set its face against that. Let History judge."

The commander of La Nueve, Captain Dronne has let us have this note from his campaign diary: "The high command was lacking in boldness. It let Germans get away whom the Allied forces would run into again, rather later, lined up against them and appropriately reorganised. The Americans have shown themselves overly cautious and very sluggish."

One of the most efficient munitions chiefs to the II Armoured Division, *Bamba*, reiterates what other eyewitnesses to the battle of France (in the second semester on 1944) stated: "But for their overwhelming material superiority, the fact is that I have no idea what might have befallen .. ordinary American soldiers could even be seen carrying toilet paper in the packs. On 22 August – the day on which Leclerc decided to race flat-out for Paris – the Americans passed Chartres and Dreux, to the west of the French capital. "

But a frontal assault upon and occupation of Paris were not part of the Allied high command's inflexible plans up until 15 September 1944. The Americans had a real fear of street-fighting and keeping several million people supplied would have meant reassigning too many vehicles and personnel. For his part, General Montgomery was none too bothered about the French capital either. The greatest obsession of the British was with occupying the English Channel zone so as to seize the VI and V2 rocket launch pads set up there and thus end the terrifying onslaught on London.

Fear that Paris might meet the same fate as Warsaw – it was known that Hitler had ordered her to be destroyed – triggered a popular uprising and accelerated the race by Leclerc's men to assist the resistance within Paris.

Other Spaniards, primarily those organised as the OME (Organización Militar Española – Spanish Servicemen's Organisation) and later as the AGE (Agrupación Guerrillera Española – Spanish Guerrilla Group) supported the popular uprising in that hundreds of them got involved in the street fighting.

We shall never know exactly how many of our countrymen paid with their lives for the liberation of France and of Paris. What we do know is that two Spanish AGE leaders, Buitrago from Madrid and Barón Carreño from Melilla perished there: the former on the barricades and the latter at the hands of the terrifying Gestapo only a few days prior to the liberation of the French capital. This chapter in our history, as written beyond Spain's borders, has yet to be uncovered.

#### *Germany-bound*

On 8 September Leclerc's men resumed their push eastwards. Finally, the pledge they had made at the Kufra (Libya) oasis after capturing that important Italian fortress was about to be realised. "Nobody was going to stop us now before we had liberated Metz and Strasbourg."

And so it was: the capital city of Lorraine was liberated in late September and Strasbourg on 23 November, even as they reached the banks of the Rhine and the border with Germany. Over the almost three months' worth of operations carried out between Paris and Alsace, there was a team surreptitiously at work within No 9 Company and made up of veteran libertarian fighters (like Manuel Huet, Joaquín Blesa, Liberto Ros and Mariño); with the connivance of Campos from the Canaries, Bullosa from Barcelona (from No 3 Section), from several French officers and from *Bamba*, it combed the captured territory, retrieving German heavy armaments which were set aside for smuggling into Spain via Paris and Toulouse.

Which is another very intriguing and extraordinary episode that will also have to be investigated and written about some day, just to show how inventive these Iberians were.

The Rhine was crossed on 27 April 1945 by means of a pontoon bridge. And Leclerc pulled his first stunt right there. Since neither he nor any of the western



Allies were in a position to savour the delights of occupying Berlin – an honour gifted to the Soviets – the French general decided that his men would overrun Hitler's "Eagle's Nest" in Berchtesgaden, in the Tyrolean Alps.

Whilst the bulk of the II Armoured Division, south of Karlsruhe (in Rastatt), sticking to the official itinerary laid down for them by the Allied high command, pressed on towards Munich, Nordlingen and Augsburg, Leclerc dispatched a number of motorised units southwards.

Cutting through Stuttgart, Sigmaringen (where they almost linked up again with the Legion's XIII Semi-Brigade), Sangen and Wilhelm-im-Oberbayern, the IX Company, spearheading things as ever, arrived in Berchtesgaden on 5 May, three days before the Germans sued for a ceasefire.

"In Inzell pass and tunnel fighting" – Moreno explained – "we Spaniards from La Nueve sustained few losses, for the very simple reason that on the long trek from the beaches of Normandy to the approaches to Austria, we had lost nearly everybody already. If my reckoning is correct, by the time the war finished on 8 May 1945, of the 148 Spaniards who had landed on Normandy's Utah Beach, only 16 of us were left."