

## KURT MEYER PANZER LEADER, WAR CRIMINAL

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**Introduction:** Kurt Meyer embodied the concept of the fanatical Nazi who would fight to the death for his beloved Führer. Few German officers could claim more combat experience than Meyer, who began his service with the SS in 1933 as a member of Hitler's elite bodyguard. In 1939, he fought in Poland, and in 1940, in Holland and France. As a regimental commander he played a leading role in the Greek campaign.

According to the interrogation report after his capture in 1944, when Hitler invaded Russia he was at the forefront of the drive to the east:

*"For three years he fought in Russia reaching almost the furthest point to be achieved by German forces, deep in the remote Caucasus. Three times he was completely encircled by Russian forces, during the retreat, and fought his way out with a handful of survivors...To him the battle of Caen-Falaise was magnificent in the best Wagnerian tradition. As he described his actions and those of his men, it seemed as though he liked to*

*consider himself as Siegfried leading his warriors to their deaths."*

**Early Life:** Kurt Adolph Wilhelm Meyer was born in Jerxheim, Duchy of Brunswick (now Lower Saxony) on December 23, 1910. He came from a lower class family, his father being employed as a factory worker. In 1914, his father joined the Imperial German Army and served as an NCO in the First World War, obtaining the rank of Sergeant Major before being discharged for wounds received in battle.

Meyer attended school in Jerxheim. After completing his education, he found work as an apprentice shopkeeper, followed by a stint of road construction and then as a mailman. He applied to join the Mecklenburg *Landespolizei* (Police force) and was accepted on Oct. 1, 1929.

Meyer's nickname, "Pantermeyer", had nothing to do with his later armoured warfare career. While in training at the Police Academy at Schwerin, Meyer decided to play a prank on a fellow student. His plan was to throw a pail of water on his classmate from the roof of a two story building, but Meyer slipped and fell. He landed on his feet, but suffered over 20 fractures. He was expected to die, but he recovered to full health. After this, Meyer's classmates christened him "Panzer" because he was as tough as a battle tank.

**Military Career:** Meyer joined the NSDAP on 1 September 1930, three years before Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. He then applied to join the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), commanded by Heinrich Himmler. He was accepted on Oct. 15, 1931 and his first posting was to 22 *SS-Standarte* based in the town of Schwerin. Meyer was commissioned as an

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*SS-Untersturmführer* (2nd Lieutenant) in 1932. In May 1934, he was transferred to the SS's most prestigious unit, the *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler (LSSAH)*. By September 1936, Meyer had again been promoted, this time to *SS-Obersturmführer* (1st Lieutenant), and had also taken command of the *LSSAH's* Anti-Tank unit, *14 Panzerabwehrkompanie*. Meyer and the *LSSAH* took part in the bloodless annexation of Austria as a part of the XVI Army Corps, and later, under General Heinz Guderian, in the occupation of Czechoslovakia.

During the invasion of Poland, the *LSSAH* was attached to Generaloberst (*Colonel-General*) Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South. Meyer was shot through the shoulder on Sep. 7, 1939. Despite this, Meyer continued to command the anti-tank company and received the Iron Cross, second class<sup>1</sup>, on Sep. 25, 1939.

Near Modlin, in October, Meyer was alleged to have ordered the shooting of fifty Polish Jews as reprisals, and to have court-martialled a platoon commander who refused to carry out his instructions.



**Kurt Meyer, 1943**

After the campaign in Poland, Meyer requested a more mobile command. He received it in the form of the *LSSAH's* Motorcycle Reconnaissance Company (15 *Kradschützenkompanie*). He led the *LSSAH* motorcyclists through the invasion of France and the Low Countries. The

<sup>1</sup> See FCWM Research Paper 10, WWII Gallantry Medals for more information on this and other WWII awards.

*LSSAH* was attached to General von Wietersheim 's XVI Army Corps. During this campaign, Meyer was awarded the Iron Cross, first class.

Following the Western Campaign, the 15 *Kradschützenkompanie* was reorganized into the *LSSAH's Aufklärungsabteilung* (Reconnaissance Battalion) and Meyer was promoted to *SS-Sturmbannführer* (Major).

Benito Mussolini's ill-fated invasion of Greece resulted in the *Barbarossa* campaign being delayed, and German forces brought to bear on the Yugoslav and Greek forces. Meyer's detachment was ordered to cut off the Greek III Corps, currently retreating from Albania. Meyer's battalion had to storm the formidable Kleisoura Pass, drive for Lake Kastoria, and cut off the Greek forces based in the town of Kastoria.

The attack began on Apr. 13, 1941, but by the next day had stalled in the face of stiff resistance at the Kleisoura pass, near the town of Werjes. The Greek 20th Division was well entrenched in both the town and the heights bordering the pass. Meyer organised his battalion into three assault groups. The dawn attack broke the outer defences, with Meyer throwing a grenade into a group of his own men to keep the assault moving. By mid-afternoon, both the town and heights had been cleared and the road to Kastoria was open. The battle for the heights yielded 600 prisoners - all at the loss of only one officer and six men killed, one officer and seventeen men wounded. On the 16th, Meyer's battalion circled behind the Greek lines and assaulted Kastoria from the south, capturing a further 1,100 prisoners. For these actions, Meyer was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross on May 18, 1941.

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Meyer and his battalion participated in the June 1941 *Operation Barbarossa* as a part of Army Group South. His lightning quick actions during this campaign gained him the nickname "*Der schnelle Meyer*" (Speedy Meyer). Meyer ordered his men to literally "charge the guns", which resulted not only in the capture of Mariupol on the Black Sea, but also virtually a whole Soviet division. This was a typical example of Meyer's style of command: daring, brave and reckless; (Meyer himself was always at the front of his assaults).

In October, Meyer fell ill and relinquished command. After convalescing with his wife in Berlin, he returned to active duty in January 1942. Soon after returning, he was awarded the German Cross in gold, for bravery in combat.

During his absence, the *LSSAH* had been transformed into SS-Panzer Grenadier-Division *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*. After the II SS-Korps had been driven from Kharkov, General Paul Hausser ordered its recapture. Eager to reclaim their damaged prestige, the SS launched the assault with Meyer's reformed *SS-Reconnaissance Battalion 1* constantly in the forefront of the fighting. Meyer's battalion captured the entire command staff of a Soviet division.

In the final phase of the capture of Kharkov, the *Leibstandarte's* role was to capture the huge central plaza, called Red Square. Meyer led his battalion in a high speed charge to the square, capturing part of it before being cut off by Soviet defenders. Meyer and his grenadiers held their ground against vastly superior Soviet forces until they were relieved on 13 March. Meyer's battalion finally cleared the city centre after a desperate and bloody fight. In honour of this action, Red

Square was renamed *Platz der Leibstandarte*.

The Third Battle of Kharkov was the last major German victory of the war. For his actions, Meyer became the 195th man to be awarded the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross.

Meyer was alleged to have ordered the destruction of a village during the fighting around Kharkov, leading to the murder of all its inhabitants.

In the summer of 1943, Hitler declared the formation of a new SS division. The *12 SS-Panzer-Division Hitlerjugend* was to be filled by members of the Hitler Youth organization born in 1926—all 17-year olds, brought up knowing only the Nazi system. The division's commanding officers were to come from the *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*. Despite his desire to lead the Hitlerjugend's Panzer-Regiment, Meyer was selected to command the young Grenadiers of *SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 25*. Meyer was promoted to *SS-Standartenführer* (Colonel) on 21 June 1943. Early in 1944, the *Hitlerjugend* was moved to Hasselt in anticipation of the Allied invasion.



**Kurt Meyer 1944**

On 6 June 1944, the Allies launched *Operation Overlord*, the amphibious invasion of France, which opened the long-awaited Western Front. After much confusion, the *Hitlerjugend* got moving at around 1430 on 6 June, and several units advanced on Sword Beach, until they were halted by fierce naval and anti-tank fire, and by Allied air cover.

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Meyer's regiment was ready for combat by 2200 on 7 June. Meyer set up his command post in Ardenne Abbey, whose towers provided an excellent view of the rolling fields of Normandy. His first orders were "more realistic" than those of the division; while the division was ordered to break through to the beach, Meyer himself ordered his regiment to take covering positions during 7 June and await reinforcements.

During their first engagement, the *Hitlerjugend* of Meyer's regiment proved themselves brave soldiers, destroying 28 Canadian tanks while losing only "5 or 6 tanks" for their efforts, according to what Meyer could recollect when he appeared in court in Aurich after the war. The 27th Canadian Armoured Regiment reported 31 German tanks destroyed, and German casualties were serious enough to halt the SS short of their ultimate objective of pushing back the Allies to the sea.

It was during this period that the shooting of Canadian prisoners occurred. Meyer would later be charged with and convicted of ordering that no prisoners be taken, and also found guilty of responsibility for the shooting of eighteen prisoners of war.

Days of furious fighting followed, and over the next two weeks, the regiment was to suffer badly in the battles for Carpiquet Aérodrome and the villages of Contest, Buron, and Authie.

On 14 June, *SS-Brigadeführer* Fritz Witt was killed when British naval gunfire hit his command post. Meyer, as the next highest ranking officer, was promoted to divisional commander. At 33 years of age, he was the youngest German divisional commander of the war.

Meyer managed to hold the line north of Caen in spite of several British and

Canadian offensives. By 4 July, the division was reduced to a 'weak battlegroup'. Despite this, Meyer still clung to the Carpiquet Airfield while wave after wave of Allied troops and tanks tried to wrest it from his grasp. By 9 July, Meyer realised he had to withdraw his division or watch it be annihilated. On the 10th, despite Hitler's 'No Retreat' order, Meyer ordered that the *Hitlerjugend* be pulled back behind the Orne River, abandoning Caen to the Allies.

In just over one month of fighting, the *Hitlerjugend* had been reduced from 22,000 men to just under 5,000.



**The Falaise Pocket**

The Canadians began their assault on Falaise, meaning to meet up with the Americans who were circling behind the German lines, hoping to surround and destroy the German divisions around Caen.

Meyer realised at this point that further resistance could only end with death or capture; nonetheless he set up his battered division to attempt to defend the

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road to Falaise. After several days fighting, Meyer realised again that he had to try to save the remainder of his division, reduced to about 1,500 men. He led his men in an attempt to break out of the Falaise pocket.

Despite the overwhelming odds, Meyer made it out of the pocket. On 27 August, he became the 91st soldier to be awarded the Swords to the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves. Meyer and the remnants of the *Hitlerjugend* joined the retreat across the Seine River and into Belgium.

On Sep. 6, 1944, in the town of Durnal near Namur in Belgium, he was captured by partisans and handed over to American forces disguised as a German Army captain to hide his SS identity. Because he was missing and presumed dead, he was retroactively promoted to *Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Waffen SS* effective from September 1.

**War Crimes Trial:** Meyer was held as a prisoner of war until December 1945, when in the town of Aurich, Germany he was tried by the Canadians for war crimes relating to the shooting of Allied prisoners in Normandy. The charges were:

1. Prior to Jun. 7, 1944, Meyer had incited troops under his command to deny quarter to surrendering Allied soldiers.
2. On or around Jun. 7, 1944, Meyer was responsible for his troops killing twenty-three prisoners of war at Buron and Authie.
3. On or around Jun. 8, 1944, Meyer ordered his troops to kill seven prisoners of war at his headquarters at the Abbaye Ardenne.

4. On or around Jun. 8, 1944, Meyer was responsible for his troops killing seven prisoners of war, as above.

5. On or around Jun. 8, 1944, Meyer was responsible for his troops killing eleven prisoners of war, as above.

The third and fourth charges referred to the same event; the fourth charge was provided as an alternative to the third, in case the killings were found to be a war crime but he was not found to have ordered them. The fifth charge related to a separate group of prisoners; in this case, the prosecution did not allege he had directly ordered their deaths. In total, Meyer was charged with the responsibility for the deaths of twenty-three prisoners on 7 June, and eighteen more on 8 June. He pled not guilty to all five charges.



**Meyer on Trial**

A second charge sheet, which accused him of responsibility for the deaths of seven Canadian prisoners of war at Mouen on Jun. 8, 1944, was prepared but, after the successful conclusion of the first trial, it was decided not to try the second set of charges. No charges were laid against him

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regarding allegations of previous war crimes in Poland or in the Ukraine; the Canadian court was constituted only to deal with crimes committed against Canadian nationals. The court was the first major Canadian war crimes trial, and faced a number of hurdles before it could be convened. Chief among these was the fact that, as the accused was a general officer, he had to be tried by soldiers of equal rank, and finding sufficient Canadian generals able to sit was difficult. The court, as eventually constituted, had four brigadiers - one, Ian Johnston, a lawyer in civilian life - and was presided over by Major General H. W. Foster, former commander of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade in Normandy.

Following eyewitness statements by both German and Canadian soldiers, as well as French civilians, the trial found Meyer guilty of the first, fourth and fifth charges, but acquitted him of the second and third. This meant that he was deemed guilty of inciting his troops to give no quarter to the enemy, and of the responsibility for his troops killing eighteen prisoners at the Abbaye Ardenne, but *not* responsible for the killings of twenty-three at Buron and Authie; whilst he was held responsible for the deaths at the Abbaye Ardenne, he was acquitted of directly ordering the killings.

In Meyer's closing statement before sentencing, he chose not to ask for clemency, but instead defended the record of his unit and the innocence of his soldiers, and closed by saying that *"by the Canadian Army I was treated as a soldier and that the proceedings were fairly conducted."*

The court sentenced Meyer to death. The sentence was subject to confirmation by higher command, and whilst Meyer was originally willing to accept it, he was

persuaded by his wife and by his defence counsel to appeal. The appeal was reviewed by Canadian headquarters and dismissed by Major-General Christopher Vokes, the official convening authority for the court, who noted that he could not see a clear way to mitigate the sentence imposed by the court.

However, shortly before the sentence was to be carried out, the prosecutor realised that the trial regulations contained a section allowing for a final appeal to "the senior combatant officer in the theatre", and on making enquiries found that no-one had completed such a review. The execution was postponed whilst a review could be carried out; somewhat oddly, the senior officer was found to be the commander of Canadian forces in Europe, the same Christopher Vokes who had just dismissed Meyer's appeal.

On encountering the appeal for a second time, Vokes had second thoughts. He began a flurry of meetings with senior officials to discuss how he should proceed. After his deliberations, Vokes commuted the sentence to one of life imprisonment, stating that he felt Meyer's level of responsibility for the crimes did not warrant the death penalty. Following his reprieve, a Communist-operated German newspaper reported that the Soviet Union was considering putting Meyer on trial for alleged war crimes committed at Kharkov.

However, little more was heard of this, and in April, Meyer was transported to Canada to begin his sentence.

**Later Life:** Meyer served five years in Dorchester Penitentiary, in New Brunswick, where he worked in the library and learned English. He petitioned for clemency in late 1950. The Canadian government was willing to let him return

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to a German prison but not to release him outright. He was transferred to a British military prison in Werl, West Germany in 1951. He was released from prison on September 7, 1954 after the German government decided to reduce his sentence to fourteen years. As he had spent nearly ten years in prison and factoring in the conventional reduction of a third for good behaviour, he was eligible for release as having served his sentence.

He took a job working as a distributor for the Andreas Brewery in Hagen. Ironically, one of his major clients was the Canadian army officers mess at Soest, where he spent much time as a guest. Meyer became active in the Waffen-SS veteran's organization, (*Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit der Angehörigen der ehemaligen Waffen-SS (HIAG)*). He was outspoken in HIAG's battle to have war pensions awarded to former members of the *Waffen-SS*.

His memoirs, *Grenadiere* (1956), were published as part of this campaign and were a glorification of the SS's part in the war as well as of his role in it.

Politically, whilst he defended the role of the SS, he was more conciliatory; he told a reporter just after his arrival in Germany in 1951 that nationalism was past and that "a United Europe is now the only answer". At a HIAG rally in 1957, he announced that whilst he stood behind his old commanders, Hitler had made many mistakes and it was now time to look to the future, not to the past. He did not pursue a political career, partly due to ill-health; he needed a cane to walk, and suffered from heart disease and kidney problems.

After a series of mild strokes, he died of a heart attack in Hagen, Westphalia on

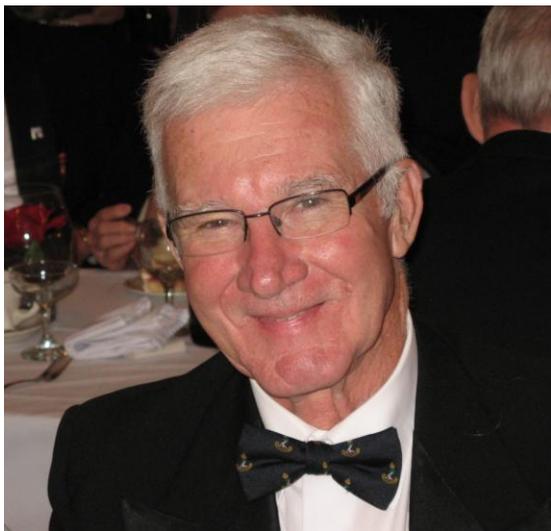
December 23, 1961, his 51st birthday. Fifteen thousand people attended Kurt Meyer's funeral in Hagen.

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