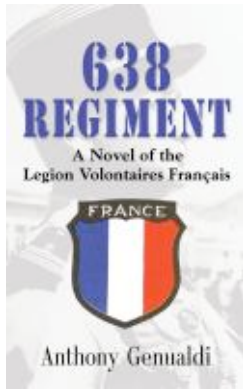


638 REGIMENT

A Novel of the
Legion Volontaires Français



Anthony Genualdi



This is a novel, based on fact, about the 638th Regiment of the German Army in World War II. This unit was made up of French volunteers from the occupied part of France. They were mostly French fascists in the beginning, but blacks and Algerians later joined as well. The unit had been deployed to what is now called Belarus to fight partisans. Sergeant LeBris and his men fight this dirty war, and he struggles with conscience.

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The following is based on a true unit that existed in World War II. Some of the events are based on fact, and some of the characters are based on real persons, but for the most part are changed to remove any resemblance to anyone living or dead.

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CHAPTER ONE

2 JULY 1942

"Sergent LeBris?"

LeBris looked up. "Yes?"

Adjutant (Warrant Officer) Vladimir Shenkovsky motioned for LeBris to come to the door, where he waited with a new private for the squad. LeBris walked over and, since he wasn't wearing his helmet, snapped to attention instead of saluting. Shenkovsky grinned and saluted. "I have a new man for you, Jacques."

"Thank you, *Mon Adjutant*."

"Private Lebouchere, this is your squad leader, Sergeant LeBris."

Lebouchere offered his hand. "Hello, *Sergent*."

LeBris shook his hand, "Welcome, Lebouchere. Follow me so we can find you a bunk." He turned to Shenkovsky. "Thank you, *Mon Adjutant*. Did Lieutenant Rielle get my note?"

"He did. He's trying his best to fill your squad, *Sergent*. We have time before the next operation, so don't worry."

"Thank you, *Mon Adjutant*." LeBris came to attention, and Shenkovsky saluted him before leaving. LeBris then turned to Lebouchere. "Come with me." The two of them walked down the hall in the old Russian barracks to reach the room where their squad was bunked. Upon reaching it, LeBris stopped and held out his hands. "*C'est le foutre brodel*." The men laughed as their squad leader motioned for them to gather around.

Lebouchere asked, "How can they laugh when you call their room a fucking mess?"

"I always tell them that. It's what my drill instructor used to say. Men, this is Private Lebouchere." The men said their hellos and shook hands as LeBris introduced them. "This is Martinez."

"Hi, Lebouchere."

"Hi, Martinez. Where are you from?"

"I grew up in Spain, then joined the Foreign Legion. I have nothing to go back to, and this pays better than being a laborer."

LeBris pointed to the next man, "This is Maldini, the Corsican. Make sure he doesn't lift your wallet."

"I always treat the newest man well, Sarge. It's when the *next* new man comes you have to worry," Maldini said with a smile and a wink.

Lebouchere smiled, "Hi, Maldini. I know your kind. I lived in Marseille for a while."

LeBris next pointed to an Algerian and a black man. "These men are our machine gun team. This is Mahmoud and Bellefontaine." Each man shook hands with the new man. "They came with the third contingent. The Germans realized they couldn't be picky about little things like race."

"Where are you from, Bellefontaine?"

"I'm from Martinique."

Lebouchere nodded, "Long way from home, aren't you?"

"What can I tell you? I'm a world traveler on a budget."

"What about you, Mahmoud?"

"I was hungry for adventure myself. Besides, I hated being a waiter, and I didn't want to be a laborer."

LeBris pointed to the last two men. "These are Pelletier and Beauvais." Both men shook hands with Lebouchere.

“So,” Lebouchere asked, “anyone from the PPF?” He was referring to Jacques Doriot’s French Popular Party, the most prominent fascist party in France. Only Beauvais raised his hand. “Good. What about the rest of you?”

LeBris shook his head. “The politics don’t matter up here. I know this was a project by all the fascists, but here, it doesn’t matter. I know you differ from each other by a degree or two, but if we get someone from another party, you just shut up about it, or I give you to Mahmoud and Bellefontaine.” The two non-whites of the squad smiled. “They have a penchant for endurance. When politics are talked, I give you to them for calisthenics. I don’t know where they get the energy.”

Mahmoud replied, “It’s because we save our breath when it comes to politics.” Everyone else laughed, except Lebouchere.

“Why are you all here then,” Lebouchere asked.

Maldini spoke first, “I have a charge of murder against me in Marseille. I’m innocent, of course, but I’d rather not be unjustly tried. I figured I’d take my chance here.”

Martinez was next. “I hate Bolshevism. I fought it in Spain, then joined the Foreign Legion to fight it again. This is my chance.”

Mahmoud spoke next. “This pays better than a waiter’s job. My pay goes home to my wife and children.”

Bellefontaine then said, “I have the same reason as Mahmoud. My family is in France, and they need the money. I shudder to think what kind of labor I’d be doing, so I’m doing this.”

Pelletier then said, “I’m here because of what happened at Mers-el-Kebir. The British shot up our fleet there, thinking we’d join the *Boche*. I lost a lot of shipmates when my

destroyer almost went down. I fight here against Britain's ally. It's the only way I have to pay them back."

"What about you, *Sergeant*?"

LeBris took a breath, then said, "I was released from a POW camp because of this unit. I found out that for every two men who enlisted, the Germans released one prisoner. I figured I should pay them back for it. Besides, this outfit needs good NCOs. I lied about being discharged instead of captured, since I heard they weren't going to take ex-POWs. So, they took me." LeBris then looked across the room and pointed. "Those are the two empty bunks left. Take your choice. Once your gear is stowed away, we'll go for lunch."

CHAPTER THREE

31 JULY 1942

Lieutenant Rielle showed up to take charge on this action. LeBris' squad was going into a village with the rest of the platoon to round up the people and search their huts and houses. Rielle was a veteran of 1940, as were most of the men. Rielle, however, wasn't a great officer and didn't inspire confidence. It had been said he surrendered his men without a fight in 1940. Shenkovsky was really looked at by the men of the unit as the leader.

The platoon marched into the village and Rielle raised his hand to halt them. He then turned to Shenkovsky. "*Mon Adjudant*, tell these people to get outside."

Shenkovsky called out in Russian, "Everyone out! Assemble in front of your houses! We're here to search. Don't attempt to interfere."

People slowly came out. Rielle turned to the men. "*Sergent*."

"Yes, *Mon Lieutenant*."

"Get your men busy searching. Be thorough. Don't leave any corner unchecked. We're moving further up the street."

"Yes, *Mon Lieutenant*." As the rest of the platoon moved on, LeBris pointed to each hut around them and to the men. "Lebouchere, you're with me. Mahmoud and Bellefontaine, search in there. Martinez and Maldini, you go in there. Beauvais, you go with ... what's your name again?"

"Fornier, *Sergent*."

“Yes, you go with Beauvais into that hut. Pelletier, with... you, I forgot your name.”

“Beaulieu, *Sergent*.”

“You go with Pelletier into that hut.” LeBris turned to Lebouchere. “Nice to get new men. Now I just have to remember their names.”

LeBris went into the hut with Lebouchere behind him. The smell of meat cooking permeated the air. The two of them fanned out and started looking over and moving things. Weapons and explosives could be hidden anywhere. Lebouchere came to the stove, then turned to his sergeant. “Well,” LeBris said, “open it. You don’t know how clever partisans can be.”

The youngster opened the door of the stove and looked inside. “I can’t see anything.”

“Get a stick, and stir up the wood. There could be a pistol in there.”

Lebouchere looked at LeBris for a moment, then found a stick close by and stirred up the burning wood. While he did this, LeBris turned over a large bed. “I don’t see anything, *Sergent*.”

“All right. Check the cooking pots and make sure it’s just food.” Lebouchere uncovered the pots and found a spoon to stir everything up. After checking them all he said, “Looks all right.”

“Well, we’re not done yet. Search over there in the corner.” Lebouchere turned over some baskets in the corner. Nothing suspicious in there. Suddenly a woman could be heard screaming. “Come on,” LeBris said. The two of them went outside.

They saw Beauvais standing over a teenage boy with Fornier holding the woman back. “What is it,” LeBris asked.

"The boy came after me," Beauvais said. "I guess I was close to something." Beauvais held up a Russian revolver. "This little pig would have shot me."

The woman Fornier was holding struggled and shouted in Russian. "Shut up," Fornier said. LeBris took the revolver and held it in front of the boy. LeBris learned enough Russian to ask questions. "What are you doing with this?"

"We're going to drive out you French pigs, just like in 1812," the boy answered. Beauvais pulled him up and slapped him. At this point, Rielle and Shenkovsky ran up. The woman was yelling again.

Rielle asked, "What's she going on about?"

Shenkovsky replied, "*Mon Lieutenant*, she wants us to leave her son alone."

LeBris held up the revolver. "My men caught him with it, *Mon Lieutenant*."

"Shenkovsky, tell him that he and his family are under arrest. We'll give them to the Gestapo."

Shenkovsky said, "No, *Mon Lieutenant*, let's just shoot them now."

Rielle shook his head. "Our orders are to round up partisans. We are not murderers." Shenkovsky just stood and did not speak. "I gave you an order, *Adjutant*. Tell the boy and his mother they are coming with us under arrest. *Sergent*, tie them up."

"Yes, *Mon Lieutenant*. Pelletier, find some rope. You sailors tie good knots."

Rielle spoke up. "Make sure it's a good knot on that boy."

"Yes, *Lieutenant*."

"*MON Lieutenant*," Rielle angrily shot back. "I don't know what's with you Navy men."

Pelletier tied the boy's hands as he replied, "Sorry, *Mon Lieutenant*. We don't do that in the Navy because after Trafalgar, Napoléon stripped our officers of the honorific."

Rielle swallowed hard and pulled himself together. The redness in his face subsided. "I didn't know that, Pelletier. I'm sorry I yelled." He looked around then looked to LeBris. "Any other weapons found here?"

"My men didn't find anything else, *Mon Lieutenant*." LeBris checked the woman's hands to see they were well tied. "All right men, form up to escort prisoners." The squad got together around the woman and her son. Rielle and Shenkovsky looked to see that the rest of the platoon had arrived with their charges. "First squad, fall in." LeBris' men took the front of the line. Rielle and Shenkovsky took their places in front.

"Platoon, *en avant*."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

25 DECEMBER 1943

“Merry Christmas, Jacques.”

“Merry Christmas, Clare. Is your husband around?”

“I’ll go find him.” Clare stood up and went to the bedroom for a moment. Jacques LeBris had missed his sister’s marriage to his friend Paul. At least he got to be with them now for Christmas. Also, he got to see Papa’s grave. That didn’t make up for not saying good-bye to him but it was something.

So much had changed since Jacques LeBris went to war. Three years ago, he’d gone to fight for France. He was caught not far from Dieppe, trying to defend his home. He’d been a year in a POW camp before being released. He’d barely spent a week here after being released before going to Paris to enlist in the LVF. He’d only been home twice before this, and both times, he felt more distance grow between him and his sister. He hoped he could find a way, this time, to close the gap between him and what family he had left.

Clare got married while he was at the front, and he’d missed that too. What did he get in return? He had the feeling it wasn’t worth it anymore. People in town didn’t treat him the same since that time in ’40. Now, there was distance between them and him. His girlfriend had disowned him and gotten killed by the Gestapo. His medal from Vichy didn’t elicit joy from his friends and sister, as his medals from 1940 had.

The one thing he had comfort from was that Papa left him the house he’d grown up in. Clare and her new husband

lived here, so at least he had that to feel good about. They now entered the living room. "Merry Christmas, Jacques," Paul said.

"Merry Christmas, Paul. How's my brother-in-law doing?"

"I'm enjoying your old bedroom, and your sister. What could be better?"

"Knowing that you make her happy, and that you're cleaning my room so I don't have to." They all laughed at that.

"Help me with breakfast, dear," Clare asked Paul.

"Sure. Let's let your brother sleep a little more."

"Too late. I'm always up before the sun."

With dinner over and the dishes cleared, Paul and Jacques sat by the fire and sipped brandy. "How's the fishing, Paul?"

"It's all right. You don't have to worry about your sister starving, my friend. How's your business?"

"Did you ever fight, Paul? I mean hand-to-hand killing, where you had to plunge a bayonet into someone's back, and burn houses down? Did you ever shoot someone who was fighting for his country, as you were fighting for yours?"

Paul shook his head, "No."

"Well, Paul, that is my business, and business is better than ever. I've grown up with Papa's war stories and *had* to do it myself. Sometimes, I wish I'd been a fisherman too, and sometimes, I wish I'd been a farmer. But, when I think about it, my business keeps guys like you safe."

"How do you feel about the Germans?"

"You mean working *for* them, when three years ago I was against them?" Jacques sat and thought for a moment. "I figure, as do my men, that it's better with them for now than

under the Reds in Russia, coming here, forever. Marshal Petain said that to the first men in the LVF, or something like that, so I'm told. That they were fighting for France and the New Order even though they were far away." Jacques took another sip of brandy. "Now, it's just fighting for survival. The partisans aren't prisoner takers. They certainly kill us if we gave up. We know the Germans wouldn't keep them prisoner for long. It's just survival that we fight for now.

"Also, I felt I owed a debt to the LVF. Men joined up, and by doing so, got me released, so I felt I should help them. They needed NCOs and I was a sergeant. I lied about being a POW, since I'd heard they wouldn't take ex-POWs. But, they needed help. Some of my men were there for the first winter and told how terrible it was not having good squad leaders, so I helped them, and the men under me were better for it, if I do say so myself." Both men laughed at that.

Clare showed up at this point. "Ah, you're both sitting down. Good."

"What is it," Paul asked.

"Well, I went to the doctor yesterday, and found out ... that I'm pregnant!"

Jacques glared at Paul. "You got my sister pregnant?" Paul just looked back at him. After a moment, Jacques smiled and held out his hand. "Congratulations, Papa. Now I'm going to be an uncle!" They shook hands and Jacques jumped up and hugged Clare.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

26 JANUARY 1944

Hot swamps. Cold swamps. I don't know which is worse, LeBris thought. Cold swamps are better, he decided. At least with cold swamps, you didn't have to deal mosquitoes. Also, since the Germans figured out that white was better for winter, we got these nice snowsuits. This, plus the two extra pairs of socks, and this nice scarf from Clare, mean I can at least not think about the cold.

The forest of Somry was crawling with partisans, and the 638th Regiment came to kick them out. LeBris and his squad were now closing in on a log bunker that was sure to have ammunition as well as partisans. There was another bunker close by, not more than ten or fifteen meters away, ready to support the first one. LeBris halted his men in the trees to come up with a plan.

"Martinez, take the machine gun, plus, uh ... Maldini and Beauvais. Engage the bunker on the right, and keep them busy. The rest of you men come with me. This bunker closer to us is probably the one with the radio that the locals told us about."

Corporal Martinez nodded, "Can I also have Pelletier? He's got the demolition charge."

"No, he's with me. The big radio in this closer bunker is what we've got to finish off. Do you think you need another man?"

"It would be nice, *Sergent*."

LeBris nodded and looked at his men. "All right, you can have Beaulieu."

"Thanks, *Sergeant*."

"I'll give you three minutes to move in. Let's go."

Martinez nodded again, "All right. Come on, you men." Martinez moved out with his party. The minutes moved slowly as Martinez and his men moved over. The MG42 was set up. I hope this isn't a bad idea, LeBris thought. I only have three men with me. I hope we can do this.

The three minutes came and went. Martinez and his men started shooting. The MG42 started playing the jazz tune of death it played so well. LeBris motioned for his men to shoot. The partisans shot back, but Pelletier and LeBris crept closer and closer to the door along the back wall. Each shot down a man that came out. Pelletier threw a grenade to stop the next man from shutting the door.

Finally, Pelletier was close enough. Another burst of fire from LeBris was the signal to go in. Pelletier charged in, and LeBris could hear him fire the Mauser rifle again. The shooting around him kept coming, but now the waiting started. I hope Pelletier can get that charge set right.

A minute passed before Pelletier came running out. He gave a thumbs up. Now they had to get away. They broke for the trees. Both took cover and waited. LeBris looked at his watch. Ten more seconds ... five more, four, three, two, one. He put his head down.

Nothing.

He looked at Pelletier. Pelletier shrugged. There was still shooting going on, but the charge would have stopped that. "You did set that damn charge for one minute, right," LeBris asked.

"I think so."

"You *think* so?"

"I thought I did."

LeBris shook his head. "You big screw up! *Merde!* You have to go back in there and set it!"

Pelletier nodded meekly, "Yes, *Sergent.*"

"Come on." The two men got up and ran to the door of the bunker again. LeBris threw a grenade in to silence anyone still shooting. After it went off, Pelletier went in. A few moments later, he came out again. "Is it set?"

"Yes, *Sergent.*"

"You're sure?"

"You can go in and look if you want."

"Screw it," LeBris declared as he ran for the trees. Pelletier was right behind him. They took cover again. This time, LeBris didn't have time to check his watch.

The roof of the bunker flew sky high. Pieces of wood, metal, and flesh came down on the Frenchmen. LeBris picked off a piece of someone's flesh and cast it aside. Pelletier picked splinters out of his snowsuit. "I think it worked, *Sergent.*"

LeBris looked at Pelletier. "You really think so?"

Pelletier shrugged. "That's my guess." After a moment, both men laughed. They got up and went to the ruins of the bunker.

Martinez was waiting. "We got the rest of them, *Sergent.*"

"Good job. Anyone hurt?"

"Beaulieu got a splinter of wood in his eye, but he'll be all right. No one else got a scratch. Are you hurt, *Sergent?* It looks like blood on your leg."

"It's not mine. How many dead do you count in the other bunker?"

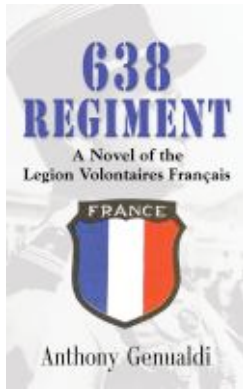
638 Regiment

“About a dozen.”

“That may have been what we had, before our little Bastille Day celebration.”

Martinez shouted, “*Vive la France!*”

“*Vive la liberté,*” the other men shouted.



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