



Free French Forces

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The Free French Forces were individuals or military units who joined "Free France", the resistance organization founded by [Charles de Gaulle](#) in 1940 in London in order to continue the struggle against the [Axis powers](#).

De Gaulle, a French government minister who rejected the armistice concluded by Maréchal [Philippe Pétain](#) and who had escaped to Britain, exhorted the French to resist in his BBC broadcast "[Appeal of 18 June](#)" (Appel du 18 juin), which had a stirring effect on morale throughout France and its colonies.

The Free French fought Axis and [Vichy](#) troops, and served on battlefronts everywhere from the Middle East to Indochina and North Africa. The Free French Navy operated as an auxiliary force to the Royal Navy, and there were Free French units in the Royal Air Force, Soviet Air Force, and British SAS.

In November 1942, the Allies invaded Vichy-controlled French North Africa, and many Vichy troops joined the Free French, with General [Henri Giraud](#) at their head. This caused the Germans to occupy Vichy France, and in retaliation a Vichy force of 60,000 in North Africa joined the Allies.

By mid-1944, the Free French numbered more than 400,000, and they participated in the [Normandy landings](#) and the invasion of Southern France, eventually leading the drive [on Paris](#). Soon they were [fighting in Alsace](#), the Alps and Brittany, and by the end of the war in Europe, they were 1,300,000 strong - the fourth-largest Allied army in Europe - and took part to the [Allied invasion of Germany](#).

Definition

In many sources, *Free French* describes any French individual or unit that fought against [Axis](#) forces after the June 1940 armistice. The reality is more complex as the French forces of the [Army of Africa](#) under General [Henri Giraud](#) did take part in the fight against the Axis, for example in [Tunisia](#) in early 1943, without any relationship with [Charles de Gaulle's](#) organization.

Historically, an individual became Free French after he enlisted in de Gaulle's Free French organisation located in [London](#). Free French units were units formed by these people. De Gaulle's organization stopped accepting members in mid-1943 as Free French forces were merging with the French forces in [North Africa](#), and the [French Committee of National Liberation](#) (Comité français de libération nationale, CFLN) was set up in [Algiers](#).

Postwar, to settle disputes over the Free French heritage, the French government issued an official definition of the term. Under this "ministerial instruction of July 1953" (*instruction ministérielle du 29 juillet 1953*), only those who served with the [Allies](#) after the Franco-German armistice in 1940 and before 1 August 1943 may correctly be called "Free French".^[2]

French forces after July 1943 are therefore correctly designated as the "forces of Liberation".

This article also includes the activities of French forces after 1942, in order to maintain continuity.

History

Prelude



General Charles de Gaulle

In 1940, [General Charles de Gaulle](#) was a member of the [French cabinet](#) during the [Battle of France](#). As French defence forces were increasingly overwhelmed, de Gaulle found himself part of a small group of politicians who argued against a negotiated surrender to [Nazi Germany](#) and [Fascist Italy](#). As these views were shared by the President of the Council, [Paul Reynaud](#), de Gaulle was sent as an emissary to [Britain](#); it was during this time that the French government collapsed.

On 16 June, the new French President of the Council, [Philippe Pétain](#), began negotiations with [Axis](#) officials. On 18 June, de Gaulle spoke to the [French people](#) via [BBC](#) radio. He asked French soldiers, sailors and airmen to join in the fight against the [Nazis](#). In France, de Gaulle's "[Appeal of the 18th of June](#)" (*Appel du 18 juin*) was not widely heard that day but, together with de Gaulle's BBC broadcasts^[3] in subsequent days and his later communications, came to be widely remembered throughout France and its colonial empire as the voice of national honour and freedom. Some of the [British Cabinet](#) had attempted to block the speech^[citation needed], but were overruled by British [Prime Minister Winston Churchill](#). To this day, the Appeal of 18 June remains one of the most famous speeches in French history. Nevertheless, on 22 June, Pétain signed the armistice followed by a similar one with Italy on June 24; both of these came into force on 25 June.^[4] After parliamentary vote 10 July, Pétain became leader of the newly established authoritarian regime known as [Vichy France](#), the town of [Vichy](#) being the seat of government.

De Gaulle was tried *in absentia* in Vichy France and sentenced to death for treason; he, on the other hand, regarded himself as the last remaining member of the legitimate Reynaud government able to exercise power, seeing the rise to power of Pétain as an unconstitutional coup.

Composition

See also: [French West Africa](#) and [French colonial empire](#)

The Free French forces were drawn mostly from the French colonial empire, rather than from [metropolitan France](#). French nationals from the tropical African colonies formed a large part of the forces at the beginning, as were nationals from [French Algeria](#). Later, many combatants were drawn from the native populations of French colonies. Sixty-five percent were conscripts from [French West Africa](#), primarily [Senegal](#)^[citation needed]. Other contingents were natives of Morocco, Algeria, and Tahiti (the Tahitians served with particular distinction in the western [Sahara](#)). The Free French forces also included units of the [Foreign Legion](#).

Out of about 60,000 troops evacuated from France in July 1940, only about 3,000 chose to continue the struggle, joining de Gaulle's army in London.^[5] By the end of the year, he had 7,000 troops.^[6]

In 1944, once the Allies had defeated the German army in [Normandy](#), Free French leaders wanted their troops to lead the [liberation of Paris](#). Allied High Command requested the Free French force in question to be all-white, if possible, but this was very difficult because of the large numbers of black West Africans in their ranks. The [2nd Armored Division](#) was chosen because only about one quarter of its troops were black.^[7]

During the winter of 1944 and 1945, many of the African troops in the Free French forces were replaced with whites.^[citation needed] This process of *blanchiment* (whitening) was undertaken for several discriminatory, and a few non-discriminatory reasons^[citation needed].

First, the full manpower of metropolitan France was available for the first time since 1940. Second, the original African recruits had suffered heavy casualties, or they had become worn-down by years of fighting, and conscripting or recruiting more was not practical. Third, African troops tended to become ill during the European winter's extreme weather^[citation needed]. Fourth, it was politically vital to get all elements of French society involved in the war, including former Vichyites, many of whom had adopted racist attitudes toward Jews, etc., and could be similarly expected to have negative feelings toward the blacks. Finally, the Free French leadership did not want France to be perceived as dependent for its victory on non-white colonial subjects.

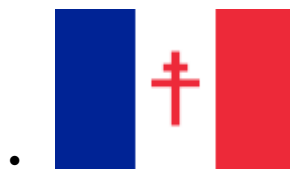
The Free French units in the [Royal Air Force](#), [Soviet Air Force](#), and British SAS were mainly composed of men from metropolitan France.

Cross of Lorraine

[Capitaine de corvette Thierry d'Argenlieu](#)^[8] suggested the adoption of the [Cross of Lorraine](#) as a symbol of the Free French, both to recall the perseverance of [Joan of Arc](#), whose symbol it had been, and as an answer to the [Nazi swastika](#).^[9] In his [general order](#) № 2 of 3 July 1940, [Vice Admiral Émile Muselier](#), two days after assuming the post of chief of the naval and air forces of the Free French, created the [bow flag](#) displaying the French colors with a red cross of [Lorraine](#), and a [cockade](#), which also featured the cross of Lorraine.

Following repeated broadcasts, by the end of July 1940, seven thousand people had volunteered for the Free French forces. The Free French Navy manned some 50 ships with about 3,700 men operating as an auxiliary force to the British [Royal Navy](#).

A monument on [Lyle Hill](#) in [Greenock](#), in western [Scotland](#), in the shape of the Cross of Lorraine combined with an anchor, was raised by subscription as a memorial to the Free French naval vessels that sailed from the [Firth of Clyde](#) to take part in the [Battle of the Atlantic](#). The memorial is also associated, locally, with the memory of the [French destroyer Maillé Brézé \(1933\)](#) which sank at the [Tail of the Bank](#).



The French flag with the [Cross of Lorraine](#), emblem of the Free French.



The Free French memorial on Lyle Hill, Greenock, overlooks [Gourock](#), [Scotland](#).



Free French [Naval ensign](#) and French Naval Honour Jack.



Free French Forces [Adrian helmet](#) with the Cross of Lorraine replacing the 1939-1940 French Republic "RF" emblem.

Mers El Kébir

British [Prime Minister Winston Churchill](#) feared that, in German or Italian hands, the ships of the [French Navy](#) could be a grave threat to the Allies. He insisted that French warships either join the Allies or be put out of use in a British, French, or neutral port. As a last resort, Churchill ordered that French warships were to be destroyed by British attack.

On 3 July 1940, British warships [attacked French ships at Mers El Kébir](#) in [Algeria](#), sinking or crippling three battleships. This attack caused bitterness in France, particularly in the Navy (over 1,000 French sailors were killed), and discouraged many French soldiers from joining the Free French forces.

Some French warships did remain on the Allied side and others re-joined later after the Axis occupation of Vichy France (codenamed [Case Anton](#)) and the [scuttling of the French fleet in Toulon](#). Those ships flew a separate flag, the Free French Naval Ensign, which is still in use as a mark of honour by ships that continue to use the name of a Free French ship.

The struggle for control of French colonies



The fall of [Damascus](#) to the Allies, late June 1941. A car carrying Free French commanders General [Georges Catroux](#) and General [Paul Louis Le Gentilhomme](#) enters the city, escorted by French [Circassian](#) cavalry (*Gardes Tcherkess*).



Insigna of the Free French Forces in the Far East ([French Indochina](#)), Langlade Mission.

After the fall of France in 1940, the [French colonies](#) of [Cameroun](#) and [French Equatorial Africa](#) (except for [Gabon](#)) joined the Free French while the remainder sided with the Vichy Regime. With the addition of French African colonies came a large number of African [colonial troops](#). From July–November 1940, Free French forces fought French troops loyal to [Vichy France](#) during the [West African Campaign](#). The outcome of this campaign was mixed with the Vichy French claiming victory at the [Battle of Dakar](#) and the Free French claiming victory at the [Battle of Gabon](#). The [French West African](#) colonies remained Vichy French and the [French Equatorial African](#) colonies, now including Gabon, remained Free French.

In Asia and the Pacific, the French [South Pacific](#) colonies of [New Caledonia](#), [French Polynesia](#) and the [New Hebrides](#) joined the Free French later. The South Pacific colonies would become vital [Allied](#) bases in the [Pacific Ocean](#). [French Indochina](#) was [invaded by Japan](#) in September 1940, although the colony remained under nominal Vichy control. On 9 March 1945, the Japanese took full control of [Indochina](#) and launched the [Second French Indochina Campaign](#).

In North America, [Saint-Pierre and Miquelon](#) (near [Canada](#)) joined the Free French after an "invasion" on 24 December 1941 by [Rear Admiral Emile Muselier](#) and the forces he was able to load onto three corvettes and a submarine of the [Free French Naval Forces](#) (*Forces navales françaises libres*, or FNFL).

During 1941, Free French units fought with the British Commonwealth army against Italian troops in [Ethiopia](#) and [Eritrea](#) during the [East African Campaign](#). During the [Syria-Lebanon Campaign](#), Free French forces fighting alongside British Commonwealth forces once more faced French troops loyal to Vichy France — this time in the [Levant](#). By July 1941, General [Henri Dentz](#) and his Vichy [Army of the Levant](#) were defeated. Free French General [Georges Catroux](#) was appointed [High Commissioner](#) of the Levant. From this point, Free France controlled both [Syria](#) and [Lebanon](#) until they became independent.



15,000 Chadian soldiers fought for Free France during WWII.^[10]

In Africa, the Vichy colonies were gradually overthrown as Free French forces took part in the allied campaigns on the continent. Free French soldiers participated in the Allied [North African campaign](#), in [Libya](#) and [Egypt](#). General [Marie Pierre Koenig](#) and his unit—the 1st Free French Brigade—fought well against the *Afrika Korps* at the [Battle of Bir Hakeim](#) in June 1942, although eventually obliged to withdraw. To the west, the Allies launched [Operation Torch](#), an invasion of Vichy-controlled [French North Africa](#) in November 1942. Many Vichy troops surrendered and joined the Free French cause. Vichy coastal defences were captured by the French Resistance. Vichy General [Henri Giraud](#) rejoined the Allies, but he lacked the authority that was required and de Gaulle kept his leadership of the Free French, despite American objections. In late 1942, after the [Battle of Madagascar](#), the Vichy French forces—under [Governor-General Armand Léon Annet](#)—were defeated and Free French General [Paul Legentilhomme](#) was appointed High Commissioner for [Madagascar](#). On 28 December, after a prolonged blockade, the Vichy forces in [French Somaliland](#) were ousted.

The Nazi Germans lost faith in the Vichy regime after Operation Torch, and—during [Case Anton](#) in November 1942—German and Italian forces occupied Vichy France. In response, the 60,000-strong Vichy forces in French North Africa—the [Army of Africa](#)—joined the Allied side as the [French XIX Corps](#) within the [British 1st Army](#), which also included the [U.S. II Corps](#) and two British corps. They fought in Tunisia for six months until April 1943. Using antiquated equipment, the XIX Corps took heavy casualties (16,000) against modern armor and a desperate [Axis](#) enemy.

After these successes, [Guadeloupe](#) and [Martinique](#) in the [West Indies](#)—as well as [French Guiana](#) on the northern coast of [South America](#)—joined Free France in 1943. In November 1943, the French forces received enough military equipment through [Lend-Lease](#) to re-equip eight divisions and allow the return of borrowed British equipment. At this point, the Free French and ex-Vichy French Corps were merged. In 1943, [Colonel](#) (later General) [Philippe Leclerc](#) and [Lieutenant-Colonel Camille d'Ornano](#) led a column of 16,500 colonial troops from [Chad](#) to attack Italian forces in southern [Libya](#) and to occupy [Kufra](#) in the [Fezzan](#) region.

The air war

Main article: [Free French Air Force](#)



Emile Fayolle, pilot of the [Free French Air Force](#), during the [Battle of Britain](#).

There were sufficient Free French pilots to man several squadrons based in Britain and North Africa, mainly from African colonial bases but also volunteers from South American countries such as [Uruguay](#), [Argentina](#) and [Chile](#). They were initially equipped with a mixture of British, French and American aircraft. They had mixed success at first, and French army-air cooperation was often poor.

At de Gaulle's initiative, the [Groupe de Chasse 3 Normandie](#) was formed on 1 September 1942, for service on the [Eastern Front](#). It served with distinction and was awarded the supplementary title *Niemen* by Stalin.

The war at sea

Main article: [Free French Naval Forces](#)

The Free French Navy—commanded by [Admiral Emile Muselier](#)—played a role in the occupation of French colonies in Africa, in supporting the [French Resistance](#), in [D-Day \(Operation Neptune\)](#), and the [Pacific War](#).

The *Forces Françaises Combattantes* and National Council of the Resistance

The [French Resistance](#) gradually grew in strength. General de Gaulle set a plan to bring together the different groups under his leadership. He changed the name of his movement to "Fighting French Forces" (*Forces Françaises Combattantes*) and sent [Jean Moulin](#) back to France to unite the eight major [French Resistance](#) groups into one organisation. Moulin got their agreement to form the "National Council of the Resistance" ([Conseil National de la Résistance](#)). Moulin was eventually captured, and died under brutal torture by the [Gestapo](#).

Later, the Resistance was more formally referred to as the "[French Forces of the Interior](#)" (*Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur*, or FFI). From October 1944-March 1945, many FFI units were amalgamated into the [French Army](#) in order to regularize the units.

Liberation of France



FFF leaders General [Henri Giraud](#) and General [Charles de Gaulle](#) in front of Roosevelt and Churchill at the [Casablanca Conference](#), 14 January 1943.

In September 1943, the liberation of [Corsica](#) began with the landing of elements of the reconstituted [French I Corps \(Operation Vésuve\)](#). During the [Italian Campaign](#) of 1943-1944, 130,000 Free French soldiers fought on the Allied side, notably in the fighting on the [Winter Line](#) and [Gustav Line](#).^{[[citation needed](#)]} Another source gives the number of 70,000.^{[[6](#)]}

By the time of the [Normandy Invasion](#), the Free French forces numbered more than 400,000 strong.^{[[citation needed](#)]} 900 Free French [paratroopers](#) landed as part of the British [Special Air Service \(SAS\) Brigade](#); the [Free French 2nd Armored Division](#)—under General Leclerc—landed at [Utah Beach](#) in [Normandy](#) on 1 August 1944, and eventually led the drive toward [Paris](#), while the divisions which had been fighting in Italy became part of the [French First Army](#)—under General [Jean de Lattre de Tassigny](#)—and joined the [U.S. 7th Army](#) in [Operation Dragoon](#). This operation was the Allied invasion of [southern France](#). The Allied forces advanced up the line of the [Rhône River](#) to liberate the [Vosges](#) and southern [Alsace](#).



Leclerc's [2nd Armored Division](#) parading down the [Champs-Élysées](#) on 26 August 1944, the day after the [Liberation of Paris](#).

Fearing the Germans would destroy [Paris](#) if attacked by a [frontal assault](#), General [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) ordered his forces to cease their advance and [reconnoitre](#) the situation. At this time, [Parisians rose up in full-scale revolt](#). As the Allied forces waited near Paris, General Eisenhower acceded to pressure from de Gaulle and his Free French Forces. De Gaulle was

furious about the delay and was unwilling to allow the people of Paris to be slaughtered as had happened in the [Polish](#) capital of [Warsaw](#) during the [Warsaw Uprising](#). De Gaulle ordered General Leclerc to attack single-handedly without the aid of Allied forces. In response, General Eisenhower—in an attempt to spare De Gaulle's forces heavy casualties during his initiative—granted the Free French forces the honour of spearheading the Allied assault and liberating the capital city of France.

General Leclerc sent a small advance party to enter Paris, with the message that the [2e Division Blindée](#) (composed of 10,000 French, 3,600 Maghrebis ^{[11][12]} and about 350 Spaniards^[13]) would be there the following day. This party was commanded by Captain [Raymond Dronne](#), and was given the honor to be the first Allied unit to enter Paris ahead of the *2e Division Blindée*. The 9th company of the 3rd Battalion of the *Régiment de Marche du Tchad* was made up mainly of Spanish Republican exiles. After hard fighting that cost the 2nd Division 35 tanks, six self-propelled guns, and 111 vehicles, [von Choltitz](#), the military governor of Paris, surrendered the city at the Hôtel Maurice. Jubilant crowds greeted the [Liberation of Paris](#). French forces and de Gaulle conducted a now iconic parade through the city.

End of the war

By September 1944, the Free French forces stood at 550,000 (including 195,000 French from North-Africa and 295,000 Maghrebis).^[14] This number rose to 1 million by the end of the year. French forces were fighting in [Alsace](#), the [Alps](#), and [Brittany](#). In May 1945, by the [end of the war in Europe](#), the Free French forces comprised 1,300,000 personnel, and included seven infantry divisions and three armored divisions fighting in [Germany](#) making it the fourth largest allied army in Europe behind the Soviet Union, the U.S. and Britain. The French offered to send a division to the Pacific to help fight the Japanese toward the end of the war, but it ended before they could be sent.

At that time, General [Alphonse Juin](#) was the [chief of staff](#) of the [French army](#), but it was General [François Sevez](#) who represented France at [Reims](#) on 7 May, while it was General [Jean de Lattre de Tassigny](#) who was the leader of the French delegation at Berlin on [V-E day](#), as he was the commander of the [French First Army](#). France was then given an occupation zone in Germany, as well as in Austria and in the city of [Berlin](#), but they were given it slightly later than those of the "[Big Three](#)". It was not only the role that France played in the war which was recognized, but its important strategic position and significance in the [Cold War](#) as a major democratic, [capitalist](#) nation of [Western Europe](#) in holding back the influence of [communism](#) on the continent.

Units and commands on 8 May 1945



Arms of [General Leclerc's 2nd Armored Division](#) involved in the [battle for Paris](#).

Armies

- [French First Army](#)
- Atlantic Army Detachment
- Alpine Army Detachment

Corps

- [I Army Corps](#)
- [II Army Corps](#)
- III Army Corps^[15]

Divisions

- [1st Free French Division](#)^[16]
- 2nd Moroccan [Infantry Division](#)
- [3rd Algerian Infantry Division](#)
- 4th Moroccan Mountain Division
- 9th Colonial Infantry Division
- 27th Alpine Infantry Division^[17]
- 1st Armored Division
- [2nd Armored Division](#)^[16]
- 3rd Armored Division^{[15][17]}
- [5th Armored Division](#)
- 1st Infantry Division^{[15][17]}
- 10th Infantry Division^[17]
- 14th Infantry Division^[17]
- 19th Infantry Division^[17]
- 23rd Infantry Division^[17]
- 25th Infantry Division^[17]
- 36th Infantry Division^[15]

- 1st Far East Colonial Division^[15]
- 2nd Far East Colonial Division^[15]
- 3rd and 4th Free French S.A.S. ([Special Air Service](#)) Battalions