

FRENCH AIRBORNE TROOPS IN 1935 – 1945



Fred Geille was born on 19th November 1896. In November 1914, at 18 years old he enlisted in the infantry and fought bravely on different fronts. He is wounded during an assault in April 1915. In 1917, his platoon leader is killed; he takes the command of the unit and pulls the Germans back. He is then promoted 2nd lieutenant and is awarded a citation by the division.

But Geille had a passion for aviation and in 1917 he is formed as aerial observer and enlisted in the BR 7 squadron. He behaved with the same bravery as in the infantry during various missions over the enemy lines. On 15th November 1918, he is awarded a second citation. In July 1919, he is sent in Poland in general Haller's "blue division", which was fully armed and equipped in French gear. He earns in Poland a third citation as excellent observer. On 25th May 1919, he flew during a reconnaissance over Tarnopol, 150km behind the enemy lines. The aircraft was damaged by enemy fire at low altitude but he managed to bring back precious intelligence. Note that he married a Polish wife and had 3 girls with her: Danouta, Maryla and Héléna.

Back in France, he earned his pilot wings on 7th October 1920 and served successively in France, in North Africa and in the Levant (Syria and Lebanon), where he is promoted captain at Christmas 1927. Back in France, he will be in 1935-1937 at the origin of the first French airborne troops.

In 1935 an airborne training center is created by capitaine Geille at Avignon-Pujaut. The first French airborne troops were called "infanterie de l'air" and officially created on 1st April 1937, after a decision taken on 20th October 1936. Two "Groupes de l'Infanterie de l'Air" (GIA.) were formed (601st in Reims and 602nd in Baraki in Algeria).

Each group is composed of :

- one HQ
- one transport aircraft squadron

- one airborne infantry company (= CIA = Compagnie d'Infanterie de l'Air) : 175 men organized in 3 platoons + 1 support platoon (with 2 37mm TR infantry guns and 2 Hotchkiss Mle 1914 HMGs).

Groupe de l'infanterie de l'air 601 (1937)

- commander : commandant Mayet (after commandant Arsac)
- commander of the infantry company : capitaine Sauvagnac assisted by lieutenant Glaizot (the lieutenants in the squads are Le Bourhis, Mayer, Audebert, Lespina, Fournier and Foucault)

Groupe de l'infanterie de l'air 602 (1937)

- commander : commandant Michel
- commander of the infantry company : capitaine Loizeau assisted by lieutenant Dupouts (the lieutenants in the squads are Fleury, Morel, Chevalier, Lemaître, Lemire and Bastouil)

Each 12-men squad is armed with Mousqueton Berthier Mle 1892 M16, 2 FM 24/29 LMGs per squad, one VB launcher and hand grenades (36 carbines and 6 LMGs in one platoon). The MAS 36 CR39, a MAS 36 with foldable stock specially designed for airborne troops was never put into service before the armistice. Seven Boys anti-tank rifles were also already used in the Corps Francs in 1939. The 37mm infantry guns and HMGs are launched in separate containers in the bomb bay of the planes but the small arms are attached to the men during the drop.

The doctrine and formation are inspired from the big Russian trainings observed in Kiev in 1935. Many specific equipments, girdles for the fixation of various equipments, the leg bag etc. are specially studied and realized by the French Air Force. These equipments were presented to the British forces in 1939 and adopted by the British SAS. The parachutes are first American Irvin sport models imported by the SGP (Société Générale des Parachutes) from the factory in England and Russian copies of the Irvin model and later French models : the Aviorex 120 and 130 models.

Concerning the transport aircrafts squadrons :

- GIA 601 started with Potez 650 and received Farman 224 in September 1939
- GIA 602 started with LeO 213 and was equipped with Potez 650 in March 1938

On 7th October 1937, capitaine Sauvagnac beats the world record of free fall without inhalator with 74 seconds.

At First the doctrine is concerning the use of small saboteurs groups for the destruction of factories or bridges. Much training was organized for the new airborne troops. For example in August 1937 the 601st CIA

seized a bridge on the Durance and in September 1937 after a drop of 100m only in a rainy sky they seized by surprise the HQ of a whole division.

In October 1938 the whole 601st CIA is dropped on BA112 airbase by 5 planes and in less than 3 minutes after the beginning of the dropping the first 37mm rounds were shot. The German

observers invited to this presentation were impressed and unlike the French high command they used these lessons.

In September 1939, the 601st is based in Avignon-Pujaut and the 602nd in Montélimar. In November 1939 they are directed towards Calais where they keep on alert, ready to embark in Farman 224s during one week. They were thought to jump over the Flessingue airbase and Arnemuisen isthmus in the Netherlands but the operation was never launched.

The French airborne companies are then used to form 4 "groupes francs" (52 men from the 601st CIA and 91 men from the 602nd CIA commanded by capitaine Glaizot) under the authority of the 28th alpine infantry division in Alsace. These groups are based in the No Man's Land, in Lembach (Alsace), 12km NE of Niederbronn (in the operational area of the 7th and 27th BCA - bataillon de chasseurs alpins -, alpine troops).

On February 14, 1940, the four "Groupes Francs" :

- Lieutenant Chevalier (based in Lembach)
- Lieutenant Le Bourhis (based in Lembach)
- Lieutenant Audebert (based in Obersteinbach, at 15 km west of Lembach)
- Lieutenant Lemaître (based in Obersteinbach, at 15 km west of Lembach)

are commanded by capitaine Henri Glaizot whose HQ is in Lembach.

Usually the work is divided into 3 days of patrol and 1 resting day during which capitaine Glaizot who is also a pilot, uses a recon plane from the observation squadron of Haguenau.

From 14th February to 11th March 1940 they led 28 patrols and 23 ambushes, sometimes more than 3 km behind the German lines. They lost only 2 KIAs (sergent Baratte - 602nd CIA - on 24th February and sergent Solacroup - 601st CIA - on 7th March) and 3 WIAs. They scored about 30 German soldiers KIA.

From 11th to 17th March, they returned in Niederbronn in the French lines and 54 French parachutists were awarded citations and on 22nd March the groupes francs are disbanded, the men return to their infanterie de l'air companies.

On 24th April, a group of 30 men from the 601st CIA under the commandment of capitaine Mayer was used for the protection of the French Air Force HQ and the General Vuillemin.

On 29th April, the 601st CIA left Avignon-Pujaut for Vimory next to Montargis (like the 602nd a bit later) and on 11th June the 601st CIA went to Avord. On 12th June a Farman 224 is shot down by a Me110 making 2 KIAs and 4 WIAs. During the different retreats of the French army, they organized the defense of different towns along the Loire River but they saw grossly no combat. The French airborne troops led only offensive actions during the phoney war.

On 17-27th June 1940, the "infanterie de l'air" is transferred in North Africa and on 25th August 1940, the units are disbanded.

The French airborne units of the free French forces were then created by General de Gaulle on 29th September 1940, under the command of Captain Georges Bergé (father of the French SAS). The first platoon was Jump certified at Christmas with the first British paratroopers in Central Landing Establishment - Ringway. In March and May 1941, two missions under the control of the SOE were completed in occupied France under the command of G. Bergé. ("Savanah" and "Josephine B").

These two missions were the first realized by allied forces in France. They have shown the ability to introduce a commando in occupied territory and exfiltrate it after the mission completed.

In June 1941, the 1st company was cut in three platoons. The first was assigned to the BCRA - the secret service of Free French - for special missions in occupied France. The two other platoons were the new 1st Air Infantry company (= CIA = Compagnie d'Infanterie de l'Air).

In July 1941, the 1st Air Infantry company went in North-Africa. After a time in Lebanon, the company becomes 1st "Compagnie de Chasseurs Parachutistes" (= CCP) and did a para training course in the Kabret Para Training Centre.

In September, Bergé who was now a great friend of David Stirling, obtained the authorization of General de Gaulle to be 3rd Squadron SPECIAL AIR SERVICE BRIGADE, because the ancestors of the famous General have fight in middle-age with the King of Scotland. The French General was along his life a great

friend of Scottish. In November the 3rd Squadron - 1st CCP (Compagnie de Chasseurs Parachutistes) (50 Officers, NCOs and men) began its SAS specialized training. During this time in Great Britain a new Para Unit was created to welcome volunteers in a 2nd CIA.

From June to November 1942, a lot of missions were completed successfully by French and British SAS together on airfields and logistic bases on the coast of Lybia and Cyrenaïca. At this time the mission under the command of Bergé and Lord Jellicoe in Creta Island was completed, but unfortunately Bergé and two paras were captured, and one was killed in Heraklion. Some weeks after Stirling also failed and was captured. Along the war Bergé and Stirling were interned in the Colditz fortress in Germany.

At the end of December the 1st CCP has finished its operations in middle-east and went back in Great-Britain. At this time, a new 2nd SAS Para Company was created to operate in Tunisia with some officers and veterans of the French SAS Squad. After some successful fights, in January and February the 2nd company went also back in Great-Britain. The first page of French SAS history was written.

The French SAS received as a great award and tribute the famous SAS wings and three gold inscriptions on their battle-honour. In March 1943, the veterans of the 1st and 2nd SAS companies were totally integrated to the French forces in Great-Britain and formed the 1st and 2nd "Bataillon d'Infanterie de l'Air" (= BIA = Air Infantry Battalion).

In November a 3rd BIA was created in Lebanon and Algeria and was sent to Great-Britain. On 11th January 1944, the 1st BIA (renamed 4th BIA) and the 3rd BIA were integrated to the new SAS Brigade under the command of General Mac Leod as 4th SAS and 3rd SAS. From February to May the French

SAS trained sometimes with the 1st Polish Para Brigade in Largo to prepare the landing in Europe and the operations to liberate occupied territories.

During the night of 5th June 1944, 4 sticks of 4th SAS were dropped on north and south Brittany to prepare SAS bases ("Samwest", "Dingson", "Grog"), to take contact with local Resistance and established DZ and LZ for the battalion. The mission of the French SAS was to destroy all communication lines, to prepare ambushes and sabotages in order to prevent all enemy's movements toward Normandy. These men were amongst the first allied soldiers engaged for D-Day operations with allied pathfinders units. This fact was a decision of General Montgomery. Immediately after his landing, the stick from lieutenant Marienne had to fight against German troops (Ukrainians from Vlassov's army), and corporal Bouétard was wounded and killed by a German NCO. It is often said it was the first allied soldier KIA during D-Day operation.

One night after the D-Day, 18 French SAS teams known as "Cooney parties" were dropped on all parts of Brittany to accomplish sabotages on rail roads, roads etc. in order to cut hinder all German movements towards the Normandy beachheads. At this time in Brittany about 150,000 Germans were ready to head for the Normandy landing areas. Night after night, sticks of French SAS -4th Battalion- and containers were dropped in the area of St-Marcel (Morbihan) -"Baleine DZ"- to led ambushes and sabotages and all actions were successful. They grouped also about 10,000 French resistants to fight with them. The French SAS were never more than 450 men in that area. On 18th June, in the villages of Saint-Marcel and Serent a battle was led by 200 French SAS, 4 armed jeeps and 2500 men of the French resistance (FFI) against more than 5000 Germans supported by 81mm mortars. Along the day, the French resisted to the attacks helped in the afternoon by CAS provided by P47s from the USAF but at night they had to leave the battle area and get back in the maquis. Today a Resistance Museum with a SAS display is located in the village of Saint-Marcel. After this combat, the SAS were strongly hunted and many retaliation acts were realized against the civilians.

During July, the French SAS accomplished many missions in order to delay the German forces. Less than 500 men were opposed to very importance enemy forces. In August, the 3rd US Army (Patton) came in Brittany. The 2nd Squadron of 3rd SAS was dropped in Brittany to reinforce 4th SAS. There were also a lot of armed jeeps landed by gliders (the single glider SAS operation of WW2). At the end of the Brittany campaign the French SAS had lost more than 65% of their men. Immediately, the SAS wings worn directly on left breast were awarded to 4th SAS renamed 2nd RCP (= Régiment de Chasseurs Parachutistes). The 3rd SAS became 3rd RCP. At the end of the Brittany campaign the French SAS had received for the first time the red beret. It is worn with the para cap-badge but without the lion and the crown.

From 1942 to September 1944 the French SAS have had the black beret with the same insignia. Only on 11th November, the 2nd RCP got the red beret with the SAS winged dagger embroidered cap badge to parade in Paris on the "Champs Elysées". A few time later the 3rd RCP received also the red beret with SAS cap-badge.

In August a team of 4th SAS was the first to fight in Paris for the liberation of the city. They are the first allies to enter into Paris. From September to November 1944, many SAS operations were realized in France by the two French regiments: "spencer", "harrods", "barker", "bullbasket2", "dickens", "moses", "derry", "samson", "salesman", "marshall", "snelgrove", "jockworth", "newton" and "abel". In the same time the 1st and

2nd SAS operated successfully in central and eastern France while 5th SAS operated in Normandy and on the Belgian border.

On 4th September, in the small town of "Sennecey le Grand" took place an epic combat. 4 jeeps of 3rd RCP under the command of Lieutenant Combaut de Roquebrune attacked a strong enemy convoy. Many Germans were killed, but unfortunately, the jeeps were destroyed by tanks. Now, in Sennecey le Grand stands the Inter-allied Memorial of the SAS Brigade, as a wish of David Stirling himself. At Christmas, 2nd RCP was engaged in the battle of the Bulge during operation "Franklin". Only at the end of January 1945 the regiment went back to France. After a time of training in Great Britain, the SAS were prepared for a new mission, the last of the war.

In April 1945, the last and the most important SAS operation of WW2 ("Amherst") under command of Brigadier General M. Calvert, was completed in northern Holland by 700 men of the two French regiments (this was the biggest SAS operation of WW2). Dropped, as an arrow head for the 1st Armoured Canadian Corps, during night and with very bad meteorological conditions, the sticks landed far from planned DZ. The operation was successful. In the same time British SAS had realized operation "Keystone".

On 8th May 1945, at the end of WW2 in Europe, the two French SAS regiments were assigned to French Air Force. The flag of the French SAS presented to 4th BIA in Edinburgh on 11th May 1944, was a gift of the French-Scottish association. It was one of the most awarded allied unit during WW2. On 11th November 1944, General De Gaulle during a famous parade on Champs-Élysées in Paris added the Cross of Liberation to the flag of the French SAS. The 2nd and 3rd RCP were disbanded (September 1945) and a new 2nd RCP was created. Later a SAS half-brigade was created to fight in Indochina (1946-1948) and the 2nd RCP was disbanded in Algeria at Philippeville which was also the garrison of British 2nd SAS after the landing in North-Africa in November 1942. After the half-brigade was also disbanded in 1948, the Para-Commandos of Oversea Forces took the traditions of the French SAS.

Since 1981, 1st RPIMa (1st Parachute Marine Infantry Regiment) has the missions and the traditions of the French SAS as an airborne intelligence and special operation unit. The SAS wings of WW2 with in the middle the Chimera of Indochina are worn as a special qualification on the left breast like British SAS wings, after three missions. "Who Dares Wins" is also the motto of French SAS "Qui Ose Gagne". The missions were completed in Africa, in Middle-East, during Desert Storm, in Kosovo, Yugoslavia, on Serbian border and in Afghanistan etc.