

LES NOTES DU CREOGN

Centre de Recherche de l'École des Officiers de la Gendarmerie Nationale

Issue 102 – june 2024

Commander Benoît HABERBUSCH (Dr)



The Garden of Remembrance in Arromanches

©Benoît Haberbusch



CREOGN certifies that this document was written by a human being.

80th ANNIVERSARY OF THE LIBERATION NORMANDY POLICE OFFICERS FACING THE LANDINGS (JUNE-AUGUST 1944)

“Let us be worthy of the courage of those who landed here.” The tribute paid by Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on June 6, 2024, to the last Allied veterans gathered on Omaha Beach, will remain the defining image of this year's D-Day commemorations. The collection of testimonies from the last witnesses of the landing becomes all the more precious, as does the account of former gendarme Louis Renard on the liberation of Cherbourg¹.

Despite a few memoirs and academic works on this “ultimate battle” of World War II, the actions of the gendarmes in Normandy remain largely unknown². What was the state of the Normandy gendarmerie on the eve of *Operation Overlord*? What was the frame of mind of the gendarmes in the early days of June 1944? What role did they play during the Battle of Normandy?

I) “In accordance with orders from our superiors”? The dilemma faced by Norman gendarmes on the eve of the Normandy landings

The double burden of the occupiers and Vichy

In June 1944, the gendarmes were the only military personnel still tolerated by the Germans in occupied France. In Normandy, the 3rd Legion, based in Rouen, had authority over approximately 1,600 men, divided among companies in Calvados, Eure, Manche, Orne, and Seine-Inférieure (now Seine-Maritime). Armed with nothing more than a pistol and nine cartridges, these men had to carry out unpopular missions in a context of general scarcity, somewhat mitigated by the region's agricultural resources. The brigades' duties included arresting Jews, nomads, and resistance fighters criminalized as “terrorists,” as well as guarding internment camps. The introduction of compulsory labor service (STO) in 1943 widened the gap with a population hostile to the departure of its young people to Germany³.

In January 1944, this pressure increased with the subordination of the gendarmerie to the head of the Militia, Joseph Darnand, appointed Secretary General for the Maintenance of Order (SGMO). This process of “brutalization” continued with the establishment of courts martial (January 20) and quartermasters in the MO (April 15). Faced with the possibility of a landing, the SGMO ordered the gendarmes not to participate in military operations and to oppose “illegal resistance groups.” In Elbeuf, Lieutenant Le Mouel recommended regrouping his six brigades at the police station⁴. In Seine-

1 PATARD, Frédéric. Débarquement de Normandie : un gendarme maritime Résistant témoigne. *La Presse de la Manche*, actu.fr, 19 mars 2024.
2 MASSIEU, Benjamin. *Les gendarmes dans la Bataille de Normandie*. 2014, 124 p. et HOULEY, Rémi. *Des gendarmes dans la tourmente. La compagnie de la Manche (été 1944-1945)*. Master's thesis, supervised by Jean-Noël LUC, University of Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2007-2008, 347 p. Information on the English Channel is taken from this thesis.
3 In Normandy, nearly 42,000 young people are conscripted into the STO. BAUDOT, Marcel. *Libération de la Normandie*, Paris : Hachette, 1974, 256 p. Lire : BEUCHET, Sébastien. *Le STO à hauteur d'homme : Des Ornais en Allemagne (1942-1945)*. Thèse de doctorat, sous la dir. de François ROUQUET, Université de Caen Normandie, 766 p. 2023.
4 Plan for regrouping the brigades of the Elbeuf section, June 2, 1944, Defense Historical Service—National Gendarmerie Department (SHD-DGN), GD 76 E 111.

Inférieure, the company commander's correspondence reveals his concerns, between the distribution of "Street Fighting" posters by his brigades, the burning of flax stacks, and night shifts on duty at the registry office. On June 5, he gives instructions to be taken "*in the event of a breakdown in telephone and postal communications.*"⁵

In some areas, the cycle of violence between guerrilla fighters and law enforcement agencies is already adding to the death toll. The prefect of Calvados himself is encouraging "*clean-up operations.*"⁶ In Vassy, gendarme Bonnier, who had received several death threats, was shot dead on March 15, 1944, by Maurice Hardy of the Pontécoulant resistance group⁷ who was arrested shortly afterwards by Lieutenant Quicray's men from the Vire section, who came to attack his hideout on March 31, 1944.

The perilous choice of the Resistance

Despite the risks involved due to the hierarchy or the occupying forces, several gendarmes in Normandy had already joined the Resistance before June 1944. "*Two types of resistance were established,*" recalls the grandson of a gendarme who was part of the Resistance in Orne: "*passive resistance, which slowed down the missions they were asked to carry out, and active resistance, where gendarmes took real action against the regime.*"⁸ The lack of zeal in tracking down those who refused to participate in the STO, reflected in the phrase "*unsuccessful searches*" in the reports, was the most common approach taken by the brigades, due to the limited risk of reprisals⁹.

A handful of gendarmes opted to provide more active assistance. The Resistance appreciated their military expertise in terms of weaponry and their intelligence culture. Their uniforms and *Ausweis* facilitated reconnaissance on the Atlantic Wall along the coasts of the English Channel, Calvados, and Seine-Maritime. In Vimoutiers, gendarme Pierre Annic began helping escaped prisoners very early on by providing them with false papers. In July 1943, he joined Joseph Le Dorze's Civil and Military Organization (OCM) network, with whom he communicated in Breton. He also participated in the transport of parachuted weapons and equipment.

The commitment of these pioneers often resulted in their capture after being denounced, as in the case of Captain Paul Le Flem¹⁰ from the Pont-l'Évêque section, a member of the Hector network, arrested on October 9, 1941. This was also the case in Sées with Adjutant Tual and his three gendarmes, who specialized in protecting clandestine parachute drop zones. The rescue of the crew of a flying fortress, shot down on July 4, 1943, near Belfonds, precipitated a fatal crackdown targeting a dozen resistance fighters between July 7 and August 22, 1943. Of the four gendarmes who were deported, only Adjutant Tual returned from Bergen-Belsen in 1945. As for Julien Galerne of the Pieux brigade, arrested on March 1, 1944, for acts of resistance, he died following the bombing on June 6, 1944, of the prison in Saint-Lô where he was being held.

II) June 6, 1944, the "longest day" for the gendarmes too?

The sudden outbreak of war in the Normandy countryside

"*The landing on June 6, 1944, ranks, without hesitation, among the great days in history,*" explains Olivier Wieviorka. (*...*) *By the evening of D-Day, the situation had irrevocably changed: there was a clear dividing line between 'before' and 'after.' However, nothing was [yet] decided.*"¹¹ In Calvados, the prefect summed up the mood of the population as follows: "*We hope for the landing while fearing it; we want it to be victorious and decisive, while selfishly hoping that it will not happen here.*"¹²

From the very first days of the landing, the Normans suffered random bombings, ironically referred to as "*overcast bombing techniques*" by the Allied command. This destruction also fueled Vichy propaganda, which condemned this "*liberation by bombs.*"

The gendarmes and their families shared the fate of the bombed populations in Carentan, Coutances, Valognes, and Saint-Lô, the "*capital of ruins,*" where the company's archives were destroyed. Bombing was the main cause of death among gendarmes in Normandy, accounting for 56% of casualties (32 gendarmes) and their families (31 killed)¹³: "*Not even the smallest village was spared, and there are hardly any villages in Normandy that did not suffer at some point from falling*

5 Correspondence from Squadron Leader Brunet, commander (Cdt) of the Seine-Inférieure Company (Cie), Historical Service of Defense-National Gendarmerie Department (SHD-DGN), GD 76 E 5.

6 February report by the Prefect of Calvados, Calvados Departmental Archives (ADC), M 11784.

7 Nos morts. *Bulletin d'études et d'information de la Gendarmerie*, n° 6, juin 1944, p. 39.

8 Portrait of François Le Dortz, gendarme, member of the Resistance, and deportee. *Journal de l'Orne*, actu.fr, 12 mai 2015.

9 Report No. 131/2 by Squadron Leader Coulin, commander of the Calvados company, SHD-DGN, 14 E 4.

10 General Paul Le Flem (1908–1966) gave his name to the 73rd graduating class of the EOGN in 1969.

11 WIEVIORKA, Olivier. *Histoire du débarquement en Normandie. Des origines à la Libération*, Paris : Points, 2017, 448 p.

12 Report dated May 6, 1944, from the Prefect of Calvados, ADC, M11 785.

13 DUPLAN, Raymond. *Dictionnaire des gendarmes morts à la Libération*. Coming soon.

bombs, strafing by aircraft, mine explosions, or the crash of a bomber."¹⁴ In Douvres-La-Délivrandre, police officer Bonnin had a painful experience: *"Where we had taken refuge, wounded people were arriving constantly. I was responsible for holding a lamp to light the way for the local doctor. He operated on and sorted the arrivals according to the severity of their injuries and their chances of survival. Outside, it was a veritable bloodbath."*¹⁵

In the Manche department, 25 barracks were affected, 12 of which were completely destroyed. In Lessay, the brigade was wiped out. The gendarmes took refuge until September 1944 in a house with no roof, doors, or windows. The destruction of the telephone networks forced the gendarmes to resort to the old method of couriers. *"You could say we had to start from scratch,"* confirms Captain Bouloc¹⁶.

In addition to the bombing, June 6, 1944 was marked by war crimes committed by the occupying forces, such as the massacre of between 70 and 80 prisoners at Caen prison. Among the victims were Lieutenant Martin, former section leader, Sergeant Caulet, and Constable Ménochet of the Vassy brigade, as well as Maurice Hardy, who had shot their comrade Bonnie¹⁷.

First contacts with the liberators

On June 6, 1944, the gendarmes met the liberators they had been waiting for four years. In Sainte-Mère-Église, gendarme Eugène Quoniam had a vivid memory of the event: *"They were falling from everywhere. The paratroopers were following us, they didn't know where to go. They were completely panicked."*¹⁸ Accustomed to scarcity, the gendarmes are confronted with a modern army with a wealth of equipment. The sight of a jeep, never seen before, causes a sensation among these law enforcement officers, who are more accustomed to riding bicycles.

Despite the language barrier, the gendarmes of Sainte-Mère-Église guided the first American troops parachuted into the country. Those from the Beaumont, La Hague, and Équeurdreville brigades captured and disarmed German soldiers. Perched on a tank, gendarme René Jamaux directed the *GIs* before being wounded. In Vimoutiers, the announcement of the landing meant that Pierre Annic had to resort to open warfare, sabotaging road signs and telephone lines.¹⁹

On the evening of June 6, 1944, 156,000 Allied soldiers landed in Normandy. Human losses were relatively minimal, except in the Omaha sector (7%). Nevertheless, the initial objectives were far from being achieved, namely an advance westward to Picauville, eastward to Cabourg, and southward to Caen. Similarly, the provision of a deep-water port at Cherbourg was unthinkable in the short term. The Allied soldiers were to undergo the terrible experience of hedge warfare in the Normandy bocage against a fierce enemy.

III) The Battle of Normandy or the winding road to liberation (June 6–August 25, 1944)

Obey at all costs, "isolated in small groups in the storm"?

"Your duty is simple (...) obey your superiors," proclaimed General Martin, director of the gendarmerie, on June 14, 1944, in line with Vichy's directives and contrary to the liberation process. A few days earlier, on June 8, Joseph Darnand launched the "maintenance of order" (MO) plan to deal with what the French state stubbornly insisted on equating with an insurrection, particularly against the FTP maquis. On June 15, the creation of maintenance of order tribunals targeted *"defective"* gendarmes. In Seine-Inférieure, Lieutenant Le Mouel drew up a list of possible refuges for the families of gendarmes in the event of *"very serious insurrectionary disturbances compromising the security of the State."*²⁰

A two-tiered police force was therefore operating in Normandy, one living according to Allied time and the other according to Vichy time. *"During this period,"* recalls François Bédarida, *"France found itself fragmented, with each department, each district, and almost every municipality experiencing its own unique history and timeline."*²¹ The gendarmes ensured that at least the essential government services continued to function. *"In Villers,"* recalls Pierre Queruel, *"there were still [on June 13, 1944] firefighters, postal workers, gendarmes, and a few residents."*²²

In the Manche department, Prefect Martin-Sané, who was in office from June 26 to August 2, 1944, embodied this spirit of defiance towards the Anglo-Americans when he took the company commander with him to Lengronne. For two

14 BAUDOT, Marcel, *op. cit.* note 3.

15 CAZALS, Claude. *La gendarmerie de la « Libération »*, Paris : Éditions de la Musse, 2001, p. 94.

16 Report No. 627/2 dated March 27, 1945, by Captain Bouloc, acting commander of the Manche Company, SHD-DGN, 50 E 2.

17 Report No. 13/2 dated June 28, 1944, by Lieutenant Bourret, commander of the Caen section, ADC, 726 W/16909/2.

18 Interview on April 13, 2004, in Bricquebec (Manche) with Eugène Quoniam, SHD, GD 3J32.

19 Pierre Annic was killed on June 14, 1944, during the bombing of Vimoutiers, while attempting to assist victims. Jean-Pierre Husson, Jocelyne Husson, "Annic Pierre," maitron.fr.

20 Letter No. 47/4 dated June 21, 1944, from Lieutenant Le Mouel, commander of the section at CB, SHD-DGN, GD 76 E 5.

21 BÉDARIDA, François « Préface ». In : BUTON, Philippe, GUILLON, Jean-Marie (dir.). *Les pouvoirs en France à la Libération*, Paris : Belin, 1994, p. 6-7.

22 « Juillet 1944, le long exode sur les routes de l'Orne », normandie44lamemoire.com.

months, this officer managed to maintain contact with his units and the legion headquarters in Rouen by developing a complex communication system via the companies in Orne and Eure²³. His docility caught the attention of General Martin, who personally congratulated him for continuing to provide the leadership with “*valuable intelligence on the situation in the English Channel.*”²⁴ Surrounded by Allied troops on July 28, the gendarmerie officer decided to remain where he was, while the prefect managed to escape. He returned to Saint-Lô on August 4, 1944.

The overlooked role of the gendarmes in restoring republican legality

“*The June 6 landing was an Anglo-Saxon affair, from which France was excluded. They were determined to settle in France as if it were enemy territory!*”²⁵ This diatribe by General de Gaulle, delivered to Alain Peyrefitte in 1963, reveals the leader of Free France's deep-seated resentment toward the *Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories* (AMGOT), which was supposed to replace the French administration as France was liberated. This explains his trip to Bayeux on June 14 to assert his authority and that of the Provisional Government of the French Republic (GPRF). By remaining in place, the gendarmes helped to facilitate the transition to the new commissioners of the Republic. Their recognition in front of journalists' cameras, such as on July 14 in Bayeux, where gendarme Gouget received the Croix de Guerre, was part of this desire to normalize the French authorities. The urgency of the moment also led to rapid promotions. In the Eure department, General Legentilhomme promoted gendarme Le Guern to the rank of company commander.

Aside from these political issues, the gendarmes participated in the war effort at their own level. Some followed the fighting, such as Lieutenant Giudicelli, who was killed in Cherbourg on June 25, 1944. Others accompanied the enormous Allied war machine, such as the 40-man provost marshal's office set up to guard the port of Cherbourg in early August 1944. Like their predecessors on the “Sacred Road” in Verdun, gendarmes ensured the smooth flow of reinforcements, which reached a rate of 5,000 trucks per day in mid-August on the Saint-Lô-Chartres axis.

Landed on August 1, 1944, the French 2nd Armored Division (DB) relied on gendarmes, such as those from Argentan and Alençon, to light the way as it advanced beyond enemy lines. This perilous mission cost the life of gendarme Bonhomme, who was killed by a mine on the Mieucé bridge.

Transfers to the Maquis remained rare, accounting for less than 3% of gendarmes in La Manche, which represented a quarter of desertions from the 3rd Legion between January 1 and August 30, 1944²⁶. But the price paid by these resistance fighters was high. In Gacé, gendarme Royant left his brigade on June 7 to attack German vehicles. Cornered on August 15 near Résenlieu, he saw his 7-year-old son, who had stayed by his side, die before he himself was shot. His body was not found until August 28, 1944, in a sandpit.

When the Battle of Normandy ended, the gendarmerie had suffered 3.6% casualties (57 dead), with most of the deaths occurring in Calvados (51% of casualties). The departure of the Germans gave the gendarmes priority in missions related to the end of the war (such as managing the influx of refugees). Struggling to control the savage purges, the gendarmes then focused on legal purges to restore their reputation. “*The authorities will judge us by these actions, let us not fail in our task,*” Captain Wahart urged his men²⁷.

Since 1944, the memory of the actions of the Normandy gendarmes during the Normandy landings has been perpetuated through street names (Vassy, Troarn, and Écouché) and barracks. In schools, intergenerational memory is cultivated among students. Thus, the students of Châteaulin honor Second Lieutenant Pierre Annic by marching in January 2024 in Vimoutiers. This sponsor, who sacrificed “*his own safety to come to the aid of those who desperately needed help.*”²⁸ continues to represent the values of altruism and dedication in their eyes.

Commander Benoît Haberbusch is co-holder of the Research Chair in History, Gendarmerie, Security, and Territories (HiGeSet), head of the Strategy Research Department at CREOGN, and holds a doctorate in history.

Translated by Officer Cadet Joshua James

The content of this publication should be considered as belonging to its author and CREOGN cannot be held liable for it.

23 Memo No. 988/2 dated June 7, 1944, from Colonel Demougin, commander of the Normandy Legion, SHD-DGN, 1 D3 50.

24 Note No. 22 038-1/GEND dated July 12, 1944, from General Martin, Director General of the National Gendarmerie, SHD-DGN, 1 A 53.

25 When General de Gaulle refused to participate in the commemorations of the 1944 landings. *infodujour.fr*, 6 June 2024.

26 Digital record of officers and gendarmes who voluntarily left their corps or joined the FFI and remained incorporated therein, SHD-DGN, 1 A 315.

27 Note No. 56/2 dated July 18, 1944, from Captain Wahart, commander of the Cherbourg section, July 18, 1944, SHD-DGN, 50 E 20. Read: LECOUTURIER, Yves. *L'épuration sauvage en Normandie : 1943-1946*. Éditions Heimdal, 2020.

28 Vimoutiers. The 124th class of police cadets pays tribute to its patron, Pierre Annic. *ouest-france.fr*, 29 janvier 2024.