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Remembrance stone in memory of Ernest Millet and gendarme François Duchatel, Aups (Var, France)

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## 80<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE LIBERATION THE VAR GENDARMES AND THE PROVENCE LANDING IN AUGUST 1944

"The Navy doesn't like gendarmes, but since I arrived in the Var department in southeastern France, I have witnessed so many acts of bravery and dedication on the part of the gendarmes [that it] has given me a deep admiration for the Gendarmerie." This unusual tribute, conveyed in confidence by a French Navy Captain (*commandant de vaisseau*) to Captain Geoffrey Jones, an OSS agent who had come to introduce him to a gendarme who was a member of the Resistance, reveals how little is known about the contribution of the Var gendarmes to the Provence landings<sup>1</sup>.

"Less well known than June 6, the landing in Provence on August 15 was no less crucial for the Allies in their reconquest of Europe," Jean-Marie Guillon pointed out in 2014<sup>2</sup>. The numerous commemorations for its 80th anniversary provide an opportunity to reflect on the role of the Var gendarmes during Operation Dragoon, the Provençal counterpart to Operation Overlord in Normandy<sup>3</sup>. What was their situation on the eve of this historic event? Did they take part in the fighting? How has the memory of their actions been shaped?

### I) On the eve of the landings, gendarmes faced with choices

#### 1) A very busy summer in the Var region in 1944

"Is there any difference between the Atlantic coast and the Mediterranean shore? None whatsoever for the past 18 months! (...) The south of France is under (...) the direct control of the occupying forces and their Vichy servants, who are increasingly following orders."<sup>4</sup> Leaving La Rochelle to take command of the Var district unit in Draguignan, the Major Jean Favre showed a keen understanding of the situation in the country at the dawn of summer 1944<sup>5</sup>.

At the time, the Var gendarmes were suffering the double burden of the Vichy regime and the Occupation, like their comrades in other departments, but with a few local peculiarities. Since the signing of the Cassibile Armistice, which led to the Germans taking control of the French territories occupied by the Italians, they were more likely to encounter Feldgendarmes than Italian carabinieri. As for the Jews, who were relatively discreet in the Var, the hunt was mainly carried out by "the Nazi police and their French auxiliaries," even though each French Gendarmerie squad was equipped with a handbook of anti-Semitic legislation<sup>6</sup>.

Flanked by two Pétainist deputy commanders in the Draguignan section and squad, the Major Favre quickly familiarized himself with his new unit of 500 men, around 60 of whom were based in Draguignan, with the remainder spread across 39 stations in four sections. The force also had three motorized platoons (*pelotons motorisés, PM*) deployed against the French

1 GOURCI Germain, gendarme, brigade motorisée de Draguignan, 16 February 2019 [online]. *Operation Dragoon*. Available at : <https://www.operation-dragoon.com/2019/02/16/le-gendarme-gourci-germain-brigade-motorisee-c3a9e-draguignan/>

2 GUILLON, Jean-Marie. "Le débarquement oublié du 15 août 1944 en Provence" [online]. *Le Monde*, 15 August 2014. Available at : [https://www.lemonde.fr/series-d-ete/article/2014/08/15/1944-un-vent-de-liberte-souffle-sur-la-provence\\_4472071\\_3451060.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/series-d-ete/article/2014/08/15/1944-un-vent-de-liberte-souffle-sur-la-provence_4472071_3451060.html)

3 HABERBUSCH, Benoît. "80<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la Libération, les gendarmes de Normandie face au débarquement (juin-août 1944)" [online]. *Les Notes du CREOGN*, n° 102, June 2024. Available at : <https://www.gendarmerie.interieur.gouv.fr/crgn/publications/les-notes-du-crgn/note-crogn-102-gendarmes-normandie-et-debarquement>

4 FAVRE, Pierre. *Histoire d'un militaire peu ordinaire, Fragments du siècle*. Paris : L'Harmattan, 1992, p. 157.

5 In 1944, the Alpine Legion comprised district units from the Hautes-Alpes, Basses-Alpes, Alpes-Maritimes, and Var departments.

6 GUILLON, Jean-Marie. "Vichy et les Juifs dans le Var". *Provence Historique*, January-June 1999, pp. 253-266. *Mémento de la législation des questions juives à l'usage des maires et des brigades de gendarmerie*, 1941. Archives départementales du Var (ADV), 2 W 35.

Resistance fighters (*maquisards*), who were labeled “terrorists” by the Vichy regime. From January to August 1944, Motorized Platoon No. 107, based in Draguignan, operated across the departments of Haute-Savoie, Haute-Vienne, Basses-Alpes, Var, and Alpes-Maritimes.

From March 1943, Compulsory Labor Service (*STO*) draft evaders contributed to the growth of Resistance groups, such as the Maures group led by the communist-inspired Francs-Tireurs et Partisans (FTP). Some Gendarmerie squads turned a blind eye to these defections, while some went further and demonstrated greater commitment: the Toulon squad destroyed conscription notices, while the Saint-Cyr squad warned parents<sup>7</sup>. In their reports, the gendarmes reported on the looting carried out by the Resistance groups (*maquis*) living in the countryside<sup>8</sup>. They showed less enthusiasm for pursuing them than the militiamen or the Mobile reserve groups (*Groupes mobiles de réserve, GMR*), even though they twice deployed into the Maures maquis<sup>9</sup>. News of the June 6, 1944, landings clearly altered the situation.

## 2) The Var echo of the June 6, 1944 landing

The announcement of the landings on the clandestine broadcasts of Radio London triggered, throughout southern France, a series of more or less hazardous maneuvers by the Resistance in a territory still controlled by the German 19th Army, tasked with securing the zone between the Italian and Spanish borders.

Major Favre himself gave the hasty order to take to the maquis in the Haut-Var. Along with sixty comrades, Staff Sergeant Durand experienced this epic day-long raid. The encounter with a militia convoy in Salernes could have had dramatic consequences, had Major Favre not had the presence of mind to simulate an operation against the Resistance<sup>10</sup>. On June 7, *Le Petit Var* published an appeal from Marshal Pétain asking people to obey the government's orders. Meanwhile, Gendarme Duchatel deserted to join the Vallier maquis in Canjuers. Captured in an ambush, he was shot on June 12, 1944, by militiamen. Two months later, Gendarme Pacaud was executed in Signes by the Germans along with 37 Resistance fighters and an American officer.

In this climate of civil war, it was time to rally the “legal” forces against the “terrorists.” Forced to implement the public order maintenance plan, Major Favre took stock of his forces on June 12, with 290 men arriving at the assembly points in Draguignan, Brignoles, Toulon, Le Beausset, Hyères, Fréjus, and Saint-Raphaël<sup>11</sup>. The defection rate among personnel had already reached 42%.

At that point, the officer did everything he could, using regulatory technicalities, to avoid involving his gendarmes in an anti-Maquis operation involving Germans and militiamen. His repeated evasions earned him a reprimand and a warning from the Marseille law enforcement tribunal, delivered by Inspector General Naudin. The rapid pace of events spared him any punishment.

Beginning in November 1943, Allied air raids intensified. The Var bridge was bombed 21 times until August 3, 1944. Bombers focused on certain targets, such as Toulon and La Seyne, which suffered around 100 casualties on July 11, 1944. The Var district unit did not suffer any losses among its ranks, unlike their colleagues in Normandy. Until August 15, the authorities received alarming reports from the gendarmes, such as that of Chief Warrant Officer Wignacourt warning that “the region is currently troubled by the presence of numerous terrorists.”<sup>12</sup> However, Major Favre was at their side to blow up the bridges at Aiguines, Artignosc, and Florièye in July 1944.

## II) The impetus of Dragoon for the opening of a second front in France

### 1) Draguignan, epicenter of the Var Gendarmerie resistance

Launched seventy days after Overlord, Operation Dragoon aimed to pin down enemy troops in the south in order to relieve the Normandy front and secure deep-water ports in Toulon and Marseille. From there, reinforcements were to be brought in to join the Allied armies near Dijon<sup>13</sup>.

In this vast military operation, Draguignan became a key point in blocking German reinforcements from reaching the coast via Route Nationale 7. In the town, headquarters of General Neuling's 62nd Corps, gendarmes and Resistance fighters, poorly armed, were determined to take action despite odds of one to five. The crucial issue was to link up with the American paratroopers scattered throughout the region on the night of August 14, 1944.

The gendarmes easily seized the prefecture, where the prefect and his chief of staff were confined. The first street fighting began in the middle of the afternoon when Gendarme Aubert intercepted a German patrol in the prefecture square. More gunfire echoed through the town. Later, the gendarmes cleared the Collège Général Ferrié, which had been set on fire by an enemy twice their number, and took possession of a weapons depot, which were immediately distributed, even to Jean Servais, a 14-year-old gendarme's son<sup>14</sup>.

7 Report dated January 11, 1945, by Lieutenant Coviaux, commander of the Toulon section, Service historique de la Défense – Gendarmerie Nationale Department (SHD-DGN), GD 83 E 117.

8 Report dated March 8, 1943, from the commander of the Saint-Maxime unit, ADV, 1 W 88.

9 GUILLON, Jean-Marie. “Les Maures, aux origines des maquis de Provence.” *Freinet-Pays des Maures*, n° 14, 2018, pp. 95-125.

10 FAVRE, Pierre, *Histoire d'un militaire peu ordinaire, Fragments du siècle*, pp. 164.

11 Digital record of the company's personnel on June 12, 1944, from Major Favre, commander of the Var Gendarmerie district unit, SHD-DGN, GD 83 E 31.

12 Report dated July 6, 1944, by Chief Warrant Officer Wignacourt, acting commander of the Draguignan Gendarmerie unit, SHD-DGN, GD 83 E 116.

13 CHAMPEAUX, Antoine, GAUJAC, Paul (dir). *Le Débarquement de Provence*. Paris, Lavauzelle, 2008.

14 RICO, Francis. “60 gendarmes et 150 FFI ont défendu Draguignan contre plus de 1 000 Allemands”. *L'Espoir*, 18 August 1944.

On August 16, a decisive day, several enemy incursions were stopped in the morning. The encirclement of the town made it necessary to call in paratroopers. Liaison officers, such as Gendarme Rolland, took great risks to go and meet them. The arrival of a handful of them and a few members of the Resistance brought relief, even though the forces involved remained unequal. The Gendarmerie also suffered its first casualties with the death of Gendarme Scheers in the “Morgay” district. More worryingly, the Americans warned of the risk of bombing if yellow flares were not launched, in accordance with the agreed signal. Bombs had already wounded Lieutenant Faure. Gendarme Rolland and Captain Paul of the FTP managed to retrieve the flares at the last minute. The town was saved, even as the planes flew overhead.

The arrival in the evening of paratroopers from the 517th US Company from the roads of Le Muy and Trans finally tipped the balance. On August 17, General Neuling surrendered with his staff. Draguignan had 25 dead and 73 wounded. The gendarmes lost one man and had about 20 wounded. The occupiers left 30 missing, 364 wounded, and 1,405 prisoners.

## 2) Accelerated liberation of Provence

The battle for liberation proved less costly than in Normandy. “The landing was more successful than anyone could have hoped,” says Jean-Marie Guillon. “Things moved extremely quickly. These operations are often portrayed as having been easy, which is not entirely accurate.”<sup>15</sup> The liberation of the Var took place in two stages. From August 15 to 21, most of the department came under the control of American troops and the local Resistance. Between August 20 and 28, the battle for Toulon mobilized part of General de Lattre de Tassigny's Army B. This strong French presence was another distinctive feature of the landing. These “Africans,” from French North Africa (French and “Muslims”) and colonial troops, fought alongside the 1st Free French Division (DFL).

During these crucial days, the Var gendarmerie was not spared. On August 16, two gendarmes were killed: Gendarme Chevalier at Pont de l'Estoc in Seillans and Gendarme Veilex in Fréjus. In Brignoles, others endured difficult hours under the nervous gaze of the occupiers. Some had already left to guide the Americans in order to hasten the liberation of the town, which took place on August 19. The next day, Gendarme Pierre, from the La Seyne-sur-Mer station, was killed in Le Beausset by looters. On August 21 in Hyères, Gendarme Rabateau was fatally wounded during enemy artillery bombardment while voluntarily coming to the aid of victims. His comrade Drot was wounded.

Despite the uncertainty, the gendarmes continued to maintain order: preventing looting, avoiding abuses, recovering weapons, organizing supplies, and distributing food stocks saved from destruction. In Fréjus, Gendarmes Rigail, Olivier, and Videmeont distributed food to around a hundred people gathered in shelters. Food shortages persisted for a long time, as confirmed by this report: “Each municipality feeds its inhabitants according to its means and resources.”<sup>16</sup>

However, the actions of these “soldiers of the law” were hampered by the arrival of the Republican Security Forces (*Forces républicaines de sécurité*, FRS), led by Lieutenant-Colonel Fernand Barrat of the French internal forces (*Forces françaises intérieures*, FFI), departmental head of the patriotic militias. This “second gendarmerie” revealed the Communist Party's desire to control the liberated territories<sup>17</sup>. The FRS were eventually absorbed into the process of republican restoration. Weakened by the Occupation, the Var gendarmerie asserted itself, after a moderate purge (mainly transfers), mainly because of its military status and reputation for legality.

## III) A gradual memorialization of the Var gendarmes

### 1) The making of a “hero,” a long journey

“The act of changing into civilian clothes and leaving one's post, regardless of the circumstances, except in the case of joining the Resistance and having this fact proven by a certificate from a regular Resistance leader, is called cowardice and desertion.” This coercive memorandum is revealing of the deleterious climate prevailing within the Var company at the time of the Liberation. Major Favre was harsh in his assessment of the attitude of some of his subordinates: “In Toulon, the unit was not effectively commanded and remained completely passive, when it could have played a magnificent role. In Fréjus, the section commander allowed the gendarmes to disperse. By the time they returned to their barracks, all combat action was over. In Hyères, most of the gendarmes took refuge in the countryside and did not intervene.”<sup>18</sup> This tirade contrasts sharply with the management's stated desire, in its circular of November 13, 1944, to promote the gendarmes' resistance activities in order to restore an image tarnished by the thankless missions carried out under the Occupation.

In 1945, Gendarme Duchatel became the symbol of the Resistance within the Gendarmerie: an obelisk was dedicated to him on the outskirts of Aups, bearing his photo and the inscription “gendarme maquisard” (Resistance gendarme). A square in Aups and the barracks in La Valette-du-Var (2018) were also named after him. In the decades that followed, the memory of the Var gendarmes became less prominent. Major Jardin's article on the Provence landings, published in 1964, focused on the Guard<sup>19</sup>.

15 CHARRIER, Pascal. “Le 15 août 1944, un débarquement réussi au-delà de toute espérance” [online]. *La Croix*, 15 August 2019. Available at : <https://www.la-croix.com/France/Le-15-aout-1944-debarquement-reussi-dela-toute-esperance-2019-08-15-1201041112>

16 Gendarmerie report dated September 25, 1944, to the Prefect of Var, ADV, 1 W 95.

17 GUILLON, Jean-Marie. “La libération du Var : Résistance et nouveaux pouvoirs”. *Les Cahiers de l'Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent*, n° 15, juin 1990, pp. 1-113.

18 GUILLON, Jean-Marie. “La libération du Var : Résistance et nouveaux pouvoirs”. *Les Cahiers de l'Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent*, n° 15, juin 1990, pp. 1-113.

19 The Guard was separated from the Gendarmerie from November 1940 to December 1944. Major Jardin. “Twenty years ago, the landing in Provence”. *Journal of Studies and Information*, No. 60, 2nd quarter 1964, pp. 15-19.

The 50th anniversary of World War II sparked renewed interest at a time when the last direct witnesses were beginning to disappear. Pierre Favre dedicated a book to his father, recounting his involvement in the Resistance and his role in the liberation of Draguignan. Claude Cazals also took an interest in this story, far from any hagiographic approach<sup>20</sup>.

In 2004, an initial summary of personal accounts recounted the actions of Var gendarmes during the Liberation. It was based on archives and testimonies from Gendarmes Weisse and Sabatin, Roger Veilex, son of Gendarme Veilex, and Renée Frediani, daughter of Gendarme Scheers. This collection of data enabled the Association of Collectors for the Preservation of the Heritage of the Gendarmerie (ACSPMG) to organize a traveling exhibition for the 75th anniversary of the Normandy landings. In Fréjus, where a street is named after Gendarme Veilex, students from the 358th class of the Montluçon Gendarmerie school paid tribute to their sponsor, accompanied by his son<sup>21</sup>.

## 2) Is the 80th anniversary of the Normandy landings more conducive to commemorations?

Following the success of the D-Day celebrations, the program planned for the south looks equally rich, as evidenced by the map of festivities in the Var department<sup>22</sup>. “We have been waiting a long time for enthusiasm to build around the history of the Normandy landings. Today there is a new momentum. We hope we are on the right track,” says Jean-Louis Masson, former Gendarmerie colonel and elected president of the Var department<sup>23</sup>.

Taking up the concept of the “roads to freedom” devised by Guy de La Vasselais, the “Routes varoises de la liberté” (Var roads to freedom) offer a new memorial route for the towns marked by the Provence landings: Saint-Tropez, La Croix-Valmer, Saint-Raphaël, Draguignan, and others. In Aups, the unveiling of the plaque on June 12, 2024, eighty years after the execution of Gendarme Duchatel, will be marked by a ceremony attended by Gendarmerie cadets, with a view to preserving the memory of this event<sup>24</sup>.

But the most original initiative remains, without a doubt, Philippe Natalini's film, “Les gendarmes de la Résistance” (The Gendarmes of the Resistance), in tribute to these soldiers from the Var region. “The idea stems from the observation that younger generations no longer read and that the Normandy landings are not covered in school,” explains the Var-based director. “It's a way of talking about the Resistance fighters and the Allies who came to liberate the country.”<sup>25</sup>

According to Provence 44 Productions, the association behind the project, this 75-minute film aims to “restore the true role of the gendarmerie under occupation during World War II” and to demonstrate that “the Gendarmerie was not merely a disciplined relay for the policy of collaboration [and] was not overwhelmingly a blind accomplice to roundups and deportations.”<sup>26</sup>

This popularization of science is beneficial in the face of an audience that is generally more receptive to the approximations and other historical shortcuts conveyed by certain media and social networks. As for the Gendarmerie, it has long encouraged researchers to access its archives in order to better understand this period of “dark times,” as Jean-Marc Berlière puts it. As early as 1992, Director General Dintilhac acknowledged “the suffering that the Gendarmerie (...) may have caused, sometimes intentionally, but more often unintentionally, to all innocent victims, underground fighters, deportees for political or racial reasons, and those conscripted into forced labor.”

Underestimated and not given its due recognition, the Provence landings deserve special attention in the context of World War II. Without them, liberation would have been both longer and more costly. They also force us to reassess France's role in the war. “In Normandy, it [France] was absent,” explains Karen Sarrazin (...). With the Provence landings, the French demonstrated their participation in their own liberation.<sup>27</sup> For those interested in the Gendarmerie, the Provence landings are also a privileged field of study, not only from the point of view of the Resistance, as exemplified by the many maritime gendarmes stationed in Toulon. The same is true for the French republican guard accompanying the expeditionary force landing in Provence. Guard Warga was killed in Toulon on August 21, 1944, while Chief Warrant Officer Fieschi of the 7th Guard Regiment was the first to raise the tricolor flag over the military subdivision.

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20 CAZALS, Claude. *La gendarmerie sous l'Occupation*. Paris, Les éditions la Musse, pp. 88.

21 “Les élèves gendarmes rendent hommage à leur parrain à Fréjus” [online]. *Var-Matin*, 1 July 2016. Available at : <https://www.varmatin.com/vie-locale/les-eleves-gendarmes-rendent-hommage-a-leur-parrain-a-frejus-61514>

22 Map. “Connaître toutes les manifestations liées au 80<sup>e</sup> anniversaire du Débarquement dans le Var”. *france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr*, 1 August 2024.

23 LALAY, Jean-Christophe. “80° D-Day. « Il y a un nouvel élan » : la Provence retrouve la mémoire du débarquement du 15 août 1944” [online]. *Ouest-France*, 24 April 2024. Available at : <https://www.ouest-france.fr/d-day/80e-d-day-il-y-a-un-nouvel-elan-la-provence-retrouve-la-memoire-du-debarquement-du-15-aout-1944-5faf0df8-fb27-11ee-8656-3015bc260248>

24 TUDORT, Nicolas. “La gendarmerie et la résistance en terre varoise” [online]. *Les Petites Affiches*, 29 July 2024. Available at : <https://www.petites-affiches.fr/politique.104/la-gendarmerie-et-la-resistance-en.30818.html>

25 CZERNECKI, Carola. “Un film sur les gendarmes varois dans la Résistance en tournage lundi, à Aups” [online]. *Var-Matin*, 10 June 2023. Available at : <https://www.varmatin.com/vie-associative/un-film-sur-les-gendarmes-varois-dans-la-resistance-853660>

26 “Var : un film sur les gendarmes résistants” [online]. *La Marseillaise*, 9 May 2024. Available at : <https://www.lamarseillaise.fr/societe/var-un-film-sur-les-gendarmes-resistants-J115848265>

27 SARRAZIN, Karen. “Le débarquement de Provence, second mais pas secondaire”. *Mesinfos*, 5 August 2024.