French Aces of World War 2

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Without an understanding of the events which led to the Franco-German Armistice in June 1940, the conditions afterwards which directed French fighter pilots into combat against their allies – the British and Americans – and even their own government, are difficult to understand. Consequently, some attention has been given to the operations and politics in France up until that time.

At the conclusion of World War 1, the French armed forces were arguably the most powerful and best-equipped in the world. Faced at redressing what was seen as the shame of the French defeat at the hands of the Prussians in 1870, and mourning the loss of nearly one and a half million dead in the recent conflict, a vengeful France was in no mood to be meek and cowering towards the defeated Germans. The consequence was the Treaty of Versailles, which imposed severe penalties upon the Germans. These penalties created bitter resentment in Germany, and therein lay the seeds of the far greater conflict which erupted in 1939.

Having won the war and ended all wars, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the military staffs of the victorious nations in Europe strove to develop a meaningful role for themselves. In Britain, this led to the development of a "policing" role for the Royal Air Force, which was deemed necessary in order to control the sometimes recalcitrant populations of the Empire, and the development of some original thoughts on new forms of warfare, particularly involving armour.

A publicity photo of RAF Fairey Battles of No 62 Sqn of the AASF being escorted by Curtiss Hawk of GC I/5 "somewhere over France" during the "Phoney War". In reality, such Anglo-French missions occurred only rarely during the Battle of France.

Two of the Czech pilots who flew with the Armée de l'Air, namely Tomáš Výboril (on left) and Josef Duda. The former scored seven confirmed kills in less than a month during the Battle of France while flying Curtiss Hawks with GC I/5. He later escaped to England and joined the RAF, where he was given command of No 312 Sqn in January 1943. Duda scored nine victories with GC I/5. Note that Výboril is wearing both Czech and French pilot's badges.

In France, however, there seemed to be a stagnation in military thought, brought about by a climate of continuous political instability and partitions. Even worse, the memories of the tremendous loss of life during 1914-18 seems to create a "fear of war" mentality, the result of which was the construction, at enormous expense, of the series of defensive Franco-German border fortifications known as the Maginot Line. This absorbed much of the military budget and slowed down the acquisition and development of newer hardware, particularly aircraft. Thus it was that as the French military establishment (many of whose most senior commanders were well past retirement age) declared behind their fortress walls, they not only failed to develop a coherent operational doctrine for their air force, the Armée de l'Air, but planned, in essence, to fight World War 1 all over again.

On 1 April 1933 (the same birthday being shared by the RAF) the Armée de l'Air became the Armée de l'Air, an independent unit of the French forces. Until this date the Armée de l'Air had enjoyed a similar relationship to the French army as had the Royal Flying Corps to the British army.

The Air Staff, recognising the decay into which the service had fallen, immediately began a series of planning studies to re-equip and re-organise the squadrons, but these were severely hampered by political and economic considerations.

By 1937, the consequences of these policies upon the Armée de l'Air were becoming plain for all to see. Although the force was equipped with substantial numbers of aircraft, most of these were obsolescent at best. As governments...
Adolfie Fontaine, of the French navy, poses in front of his early production MS 406, which is fitted with the distinctive Bronzavia exhaust collector. Fontaine scored six confirmed and one probable during the Battle of France before being severely wounded. For the rest of the war he served with the Resistance.

A magnificent 'pylone' executed by MS 406 No 169 (Matricule militaire N499) of GC II/5 on 26 September 1939 at Chartres. The pilot, Sgt Goedemarose, was unhurt. Such landings were not uncommon on the grass airfields of the period, most of which were little different from those used during World War I.

Against this background, the best efforts of a series of very capable Ministers of Aeronautics saw only modest improvements made over the final years of the decade. Indeed, it was not until the summer of 1938 that truly modern aircraft began to reach the squadrons.

On 1 January 1937, the Armée de l’Air had 795 fighters on strength, of which 268 were regarded as ‘modern’—these were essentially variants of the fixed-undercarriage Dewoitine D.500 series. The various planning studies which had been started in 1933 culminated in 1938 in Plan V (S). Under this, the Armée de l’Air was to receive 1273 replacement fighters, made up as follows:

- 15 Morane Saulnier MS.406s
- 1045 Morane Saulnier MS.406s
- 25 Bloch 152s
- 287 Polikarpov I-153s (two-seat fighters)

It was quickly recognised that this ambitious plan was beyond the capabilities of the French aircraft industry, which was riddled with inefficiency, industrial unrest, and, on occasions, deliberate sabotage. A shortfall of 340 aircraft by March 1938, and increasingly belligerent behaviour by Nazi Germany, demanded urgent attempts to redress the situation. The remedy required the ordering of large numbers of foreign-built aircraft, principally American, under conditions of utter secrecy. Consequently, by April 1938 the fighter aircraft needed (2363 in total) under Plan V had been revised as follows:

- 1061 Morane Saulnier MS.406s
- 327 Bloch 152s
- 200 Curtiss Hawk 75s
- 220 Gloster-Koolhoven F.34s
- 200 Dewoitine D.320s
- 200 Potez 6306s (two-seat fighters)

One of the major reasons for the chronic shortage of equipment in the Armée de l’Air was the fact that the new chief of the air force, the World War I fighter ace Guérald Joseph Vuillemin, was subordinate to the elderly General Gnadès, Chief of the Defence Staff. Gnadès, an army traditionalist, ensured that the army received the lion’s share of the defence budget. Ominously, and of even greater importance in the long term, his thoroughly conservative views on air power were not challenged by the lethargic Vuillemin.

The critical matter of co-operation between army and air force, which was so well developed by the Wehrmacht and employed with devastating effect in 1940, was largely ignored. Indeed, the official French Army Instruction gave the major role of attacking the enemy on the ground to the artillery—anti-aircraft concentrations were considered suitable targets for the air force. The instruction further stated it is convenient to leave the Air Force to concentrate the initiative for launching their attacks. It is hardly surprising that it proved virtually impossible to develop well-coordinated counterattacks against the Pioneers in summer 1940.

In September 1938 came the Munich Crisis and the dismantlement of Czechoslovakia. The pace to war was accelerating. The question was could the French aviation industry provide the necessary equipment before the outbreak...
of the war which was now clearly inevitable. Throughout the following months French aircraft production slowly gathered speed. It had already been recognised that the Morane Saulnier MS 406—the most numerous "Aerone de l'Air" fighter—was half a generation older than the later Bloch and Dewoitine types, even though it had once (briefly) been regarded as the best fighter in Europe.

The aircraft selected to replace it was the Dewoitine D.520, which was probably the finest French-designed fighter to see service in World War 2. With the best of intentions, but, with hindsight, possibly resulting in adverse effects upon the overriding need for fighters in quantity, orders were also placed for other replacement designs such as the Arsenal VG 33, Bloch 157 and C.A.O. 220.

French efforts were made to meet the requirements of Plan V (and its sub-developments), but years of neglect meant that while airframes were being turned out of the factories, there were critical shortages of components such as propellers and engines, which reduced the number of "bon de guerre" (combat-worthy) machines in the squadrons. A major, but possibly significant, French practice in the light of subsequent events was the fact that squadron pilots had to collect new aircraft from the depots and factories themselves. There was no equivalent to the British Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA).

So it was that, at dawn on 1 September 1939, the "Aerone de l'Air" had accepted into its inventory a motley collection of types (totalling 1,155 aircraft) made up as follows:

- 573 Morane Saulnier MS 406/406s
- 129 Bloch 157/152s
- 172 Curtiss Hawks 75s
- 7 Audoux-Renault 74s
- 5 Dewoitine 520
- 250 Delaunay-Belleville D20 twin-seat fighters

Looking for all the world like a model, this is Curtiss H - 75A - 1 Hawk s/n 37 (Machiniste militaire X-036). The first 47 aircraft delivered had only the four guns as seen here. The Hawks proved themselves to be the most effective fighters available to the French in the summer of 1940, with the majority of the top-scoring aces of this period flying the imported Curtiss type.

Sous Lt Francois Warnier in front of his Hawk at St. Omer shortly before the Battle of France. Warnier scored eight confirmed and two probable victories between 20 September 1939 and 5 May 1940 while he was serving with GC 1/5.

There were still many obsolete fighters such as the Dewoitine D.510, seen here behind Sous Lt Robert Thilliol, in service in 1939. Thilliol was one of the few aces to fly the Bloch 152, scoring eight confirmed victories while with GC 1/8.

These figures are the result taken on charge, including those in the fighter schools and the French colonies. Not included are the many hundreds of elderly and out-dated types, such as the Dewoitine D.520 series which still equipped some frontline units. What these numbers do not reveal, however, is the fact that many of the newer machines had not yet reached the frontline fighter units. In particular, many of the Blochs still required such basic necessities as propellers and engine oil.

The many shortcomings of the slowly resurgent "Aerone de l'Air" were not lost on its personnel. Traditional French courage and d"es were not lacking, indeed General Vuillemin had declared that if war broke out he would wish to resign his position as Chief of Air Staff and die in a bomber over Berlin—in fact he was, to his credit, to serve as a lieutenant-colonel in a bomber unit in Tunisia in 1943.

The truth was that no amount of Gallic pride could, or would, make up for a lack of organisation and equipment in the time left before the German onslaught in the west began.
As the British declared war (within some hours before that of the French) the forward elements of the RAF's Advanced Air Striking Force (AASF) were already arriving at their new bases in France. The French air arm began deploying to their satellite fields in the country side, the Allied armies dispersed themselves along the frontiers in line with their defensive strategies, and all waited for the Germans to make the first move. And waited.

Very quietly the opposing armies settled into the rhythm of the 'Drole de Guerre', or 'Phoney War', as the Germans concentrated on finishing off the Poles. In this phase of static warfare most of the air action for the fighters of the Armée de l'Air centred around border patrols and escort for various reconnaissance aircraft in an unceasing echo of the raids of the air services in the 1914-18 war.

On 8 September the first clash between the Armée de l'Air and the Luftwaffe took place near Lille when five Curtiss Hawks of GC II/4, which were escorting an observation aircraft, were attacked by four Messerschmitt Bf 109s. In the brief daylight which followed, two of the German aircraft were claimed shot down by Adjudant Vallier and Sergent-Chef Castaing for the first victory of the Armée de l'Air in World War 2. Jean Castaing would score five or six further victories before the Armistice in June 1940, and was eventually killed in an accident in North Africa in February 1943.

This type of operation set a daily pattern for the next few weeks as the opposing reconnaissance aircraft sought to establish what the enemy were doing, while the protecting fighters did their best to prevent them being shot down. On 20 September six Curtiss Hawks of GC II/3 were acting as fighter cover on such a mission in the Achterhoek sector when the high flight was bounced by four Bf 109s of 1./JG 53, led by the redoubtable Werner Molders. Two Hawks were shot down in exchange for one Bf 109 destroyed and another damaged. The air war was beginning to increase in intensity.

On 24 September there were numerous inconclusive combats, reaching in periodical bursts on both sides until 1800 hours, when the six Hawks of GC II/3, which were escorting a Poiret 657 of GR III/52 over the Epernay-Hombach sector, met fifteen Bf 109s of L/JG 52. Sergent de la Chapelle was shot down, and baled out, but not before he had damaged one of his attackers. Two more were destroyed by Adjutant Dutuande and Camille Piache (the first of the 14 confirmed and 4 probable, the latter pilot would score before the end of the French campaign). During the first month of the war, the Armée de l'Air had lost ten aircraft to air combat (six Curtiss Hawks and four Morane Saulnier MS-406s) in exchange for claims of 26 Bf 109s destroyed.

The French tactical reconnaissance units had suffered rather worse. As the air combats increased in frequency and ferocity, the inadequacies of the antiquated French reconnaissance and observation machines became readily apparent, despite the best efforts of the fighters to protect their pilots (19 had been lost by the end of the month). This, and the general similarity of the French High Command, led to the withdrawal of almost all such types from daylight operations to avoid further losses. Consequently, by October 1939, French reconnaissance efforts to determine German movements and intentions were virtually crippled.

Most air activity was curtailed by bad weather during October, and the fighters had little opportunity to add to their scores. Only four more Bf 109s were claimed by the French for the entire month, the荣誉 being shared equally between Hawks and Moranes. Three of these were more or less holding their own against the Messerschmitt Bf 109s of the Luftwaffe, but the need for more modern fighters was obvious. Taking stock of the situation, the French High Command decided upon a reorganisation of the Armée de l'Air to take advantage of the arrival. It was hoped, of the Dewoitine D 520 in the early months of 1940.

Intended to be completed by May 1940, the plan called for the most urgent introduction of the D 520. Bloch 152 and eventually, the Atalante VG 33 into 15 Groupes de Chasse equipped with Dewoitine D 500/500s and MS-406s. Simultaneously, it was hoped to introduce progressive modifications to aircraft already service in the form of variable-pitch propellers, armour plating and improved armament. The difficulties facing the groundcrew, who were already stretched coping with the many new problems presented by so many aircraft being introduced into service, can be imagined.

November began quietly enough, giving time to introduce a major change in the Armée de l'Air's tactical command system, whereby the merely complex Escadres used until then were replaced by Zones d'Operations Aerienes, with effect from the 1st of the month,
Early afternoon on Sunday 6 November saw one of the Récécit (and in France one of the most celebrated) air combat that involving Aucatis of GC II/6, escorting a Force 65 of GR II/22 on a reconnaissance mission over the river Seine, encountered a large formation of Bf 109Es from I/JG 2 at about 16,000 ft (see *Aircraft of the Aces 11*- Bf 109E/D E/A 1939-41 for further details).

Led by Hanne Gentzen, the Luftwaffe's top-scoring in Poland, the Bf 109Es were estimated at 27 strong - 20 were at the same altitude as the French, with the rest some 4000 ft higher. As the French turned into the German attack, the engagement quickly broke up into a series of scuttling individual combats.

Sergeant Edouard Sales scored the first of his seven confirmed victories when he chased one Bf 109 down to 500 ft where the pilot baled out, and then quickly followed this by knocking down another which crashed in a wood near the Sarthe. Another future ace, Sergeant André Legrand, achieved his second and third victories in this combat. The final claim for five confirmed and five probable for the loss of Le Lievre Houdz's aircraft which forced-landed on the airfield at Tours, the pilot being unhurt, after a fight with Gentzen himself. In the event the claim was downgraded to four confirmed and four probable, possibly unfairly to the French. That same day Gentzen was summoned to Berlin for an interview. The Hawks had clearly demonstrated their superiority over the Bf 109D, but increasing numbers of Bf 109Es were to make future combats far less sided.

German reconnaissance aircraft also suffered at the hands of the French pilots. Following on the success of the day before, Edouard Sales intercepted a Dornier Do 17P of 3./JG 22 on 7 November south of Bléchâtel. The machine crashed near St Diviret with no survivors. On the 8th, two Hawks of GC III/4, acting as escort to a French reconnaissance Peter, came across a Do 17P of 1./JG 22, escorted by two Bf 109s. Upon sighting the French machines these turned away, abandoning the Dornier to its fate. Camille Huchon took it for fire, and the crew, one of whom was injured, baled out just prior to the aircraft blowing up.

The 8th also saw a MS-406 of GC III/2 down when its pilot was separated from the rest of his formation, Sergeant Barbe being wounded and taken prisoner. Two days later Hawk No 125 of GC III/5 was shot down by the rear gunner of a Do 17P of Adjutant Dugoujon baling out uninjured.

Bad weather curtailed air activity until 21 November (the day the new 2000 foot ceiling was in effect), when Edouard Sales became something of a specialist in downing Dorniers when he repeated his feat of the 7th of the month. When accompanied by H. Remelé, he attacked another Do 17P of 3./JG 22 of Forchond, this time crashing, two of the crew surviving to be made prisoners. That afternoon a second pilot of six Hawks from GC III/4 bounced two Bf 109s of 3./JG 52. The aircraft of the Gruppenkommandeur, Dornier Graf von Sith was sent down in flames by Adjutant Pierre Vallet for his third victory. Vallet scored one more confirmed and a probable before being killed at a mid-air collision on 25 May soon after shooting down his fifth confirmed victory. The second Bf 109 was shared by Jean Caseneuve and Sergeant Saubier.

The following day the French fighters again caught a Luftwaffe reconnaissance Do 17, this time from 4.(J)/12, which had its twin cut off by four MS-406s of GC III/7 whilst returning from a mission. It was shot down in flames near Moos in German. Of the French pilots involved, Georges Valentin, Gabriel Gaubert and Jacques Lantin, were to become aces. The other pilot to share the victory was Jean-Luc Griselle. On the same day, as a direct result of earlier losses, the Luftwaffe's increased fighter sweeps to clear a path for their reconnaissance aircraft. Consequently, when a morning sweep by Bf 109s of 3./JG 2 surprised a patrol of Hawk 7Es of GC III/4, Sergeant Saubier was immediately shot down in flames and killed by Helmut Wick, while Camille Huchon was lightly wounded in the leg and face in the vicinity of Zerbst/Chenne. His aircraft, No 169, was written off in the subsequent crash.

Again on 22 November (this time in the early afternoon), three linked formations of MS-406s from GC III/4, III/6 and III/7, escorting several reconnaissance machines over the French IV Army area, were attacked by Bf 109s from 1./JG 76 and 2./JG 51. In the ensuing fierce dogfight, two German fighters from IG 76 were shot down (the pilots becoming prisoners) but one aircraft from GC III/4 and two from GC III/7 were lost, one pilot being slightly injured. A second pilot for the French was an unconfirmed Bf 109D which landed short of the German border when the pilot became disoriented during this flight.

On the 23rd of the month Adjutant Pierre Leclerc shot the first of
Chapter Two

IN THE TORMENT

Following the occupation of Poland, the German forces in the west were gradually built up over the early months of 1940 ready for "Fall Schleswig", the main attack on the Low Countries and France. Encounter between the French and German pilots began to occur more frequently, the first of the year being on 2 January when a dozen Hawks from GC II/5 shot down a Bf 109E of JG 53. Although no claims were made by the French, the Merlins of GC II/7 were in action on the following day, claiming a Bf 109E for no loss. A week was by without operations because of the weather, then on the 10th a Bf 109E of JG 2 was claimed by S/Lt André Legrand flying a Hawk from GC II/5 for his fourth victory. A day later the pilot who was to become the French ace of aces during the Battle of France, Lt Edmond Martin Le Meele, accompanied by fellow GC II/5 pilots, Sergt le Rey, caught a Do 17P of 3.(F)/11 at 22,000 ft above Verdun. The fight from their Hawks brought the Dominie down near the border, where the crew were captured. This was the first of many. Le Meele's sixteen confirmed and fourteen probable obtained during the battle for France. He was to die, as many other aces before him, while engaged in ground attack duties when his aircraft was shot down over Germany on 4 February 1940.

A notable victory was obtained on 13 January when a high-flying Do 17P of 1.(F)/113, flown by Le Rosier, was intercepted by Lt Baranetz and S/Lt Lemare of GC II/4. After a long chase down to sea level, the Dominie eventually crashed almost intact near Calais, the crew being captured. The aircraft's camera equipment proved to be of exceptional interest to the French.

The kill was shared between the two pilots and represented the first of 13 victories for Georges Lemare, including late actions with both the Vichy forces and with the Normandie-Niépce in Russia. Bad weather then again curtailed activity, with the result that only one more kill (a Bf 109E of 2./JG 54) was claimed by Lt Grayelle of GC II/7 flying an MS 406) before the end of the month.

Winter tightened its grip throughout February, with the result that not a single victory was scored, although three pilots were killed in accidents. March was little better; sporadic activity meaning that the only claims were for a Do 17P by GC II/5 and GC II/7. Losses both in combat and accidents, however, continued to mount. An ominous pattern was...
the loss of four MS 406s from GC III/7 in a single combat on the last day of the month, all of the pilots being killed or wounded. These other aircraft were damaged. The victors were Bf 110s of JG 77.

April opened to slowly improving weather and some brisk combat between the opposing sides. Two Moranes of GC III/2 caught a Do 17 of 4 (J)/111, which came down close to Szczecin, while two more MS 406s of GC III/2 engaged eight Bf 109s of JG 92 in their first serious combat of the war. In an inconclusive melee the Moranes claimed one Bf 109 damaged. Meanwhile five aces of GC III/3 trapped a Do 215 of 3 (J)/Otdo 11 near Longwy, although the bomber made good its escape after slightly damaging one of its tormentors. In the early afternoon an He 111 was claimed by two MS 406s from GC III/2. No French fighters were lost.

On the following day a Bf 110 and a Do 215 were claimed by GC III/3, but a pilot from GC III/2 was killed when attempting to land his crippled aircraft. On the 6th came the shattering news of the German invasion of Norway and Denmark. A few quiet days followed, probably because the Luftwaffe was preoccupied in Norway, and it was not until the 7th that the next encounter took place. In the morning MS 406s from both GC III/6 and III/3 attempted to catch a high-flying Do 17. As the fighters were only marginally faster, they were unable to do more than cause some damage and it escaped. Soon afterwards a dozen Moranes from GC III/2 bounced the Bf 109s of JG 54 near Strasbourg. One was shot down by the ‘Georges’, but one Vidal was killed when his parachute caught on the tail of his aircraft after he baled out.

Later that day it was the turn of the French to be surprised when a formation of Moranes from GC III/1 were caught unaware by Bf 109s of JG 53. One Andre Richard was killed when his crash-landed. In the afternoon II/JG 2, newly-equipped with Bf 110s, met a mixed formation of Hawkses and Moranes from GC III/6 and III/3 respectively. Two of the Messerschmitts were destroyed by the Hawkses, but Adjt Chevalier was killed in his H-75 by the gunfire of Pte. Claude Gourard. In the last afternoon some recompense for the French losses was obtained when a specially-equipped Ju 88 of a radio intelligence gathering operation was destroyed by Moranes from GC III/6 and III/7.

The next few days were the weather curtailed operations until 20 April when a notable event occurred in which a high-flying reconnaissance Ju 88 of 4 (F)/121 (which may have been already damaged) was caught by Adj Chevalier of GC III/3 and brought down as the first victory for the Bf 109s. A victory encounter between the Moranes of GC III/7 and Bf 109s of 2 (J)/94, early the same day, led to the first victory for Pierre Beillat, who exploded the aircraft of Lt. Holmhorst Hack with the fire from his 20 mm cannon. Later on a large formation of H-75s from GC III/4 were hit hard by Bf 109s from JG 53, one of the Hawkses going down with a wounded pilot. The fighters of both sides were trying their hardest, but the reconnaissance machines and bombers were trying to protect were being destroyed with depressing regularity. A solitary He 111 of KG 54 was dropped down near Maastricht by the combined efforts of several Morane pilots from GC III/3, including the later ace Maurice Le Coz. This represented his first of his five confirmed victories.

Despite improving weather, there was little action for the French pilots until the end of the month, with only two Do 17s and a Bf 109 being confirmed, one of the Do 17s being shared between the aces Edouard Sales and Pierre Vialla, and other pilots of GC III/5. During this time no fighters were lost in combat, although four (oddly, one of each of the four main types in service) crashed in accidents, all the pilots being killed.

Despite the accelerating French aircraft production programme, the Gruppen were still desperately short of modern equipment. As the counter-strike on ‘Blitzkrieg’ instead away, there was still not a single frontline unit equipped with the D.560, although more Bl0c 152 units were available.

The first nine days of May saw the Luftwaffe reserving its strength for the imminent offensive, although the French were kept busy chasing after the photo-reconnaissance Do 17s. He 111s and Ju 88s. In the calm before the storm, not a single kill was claimed, and the only loss was a pair of H-75s from GC III/5 flown by the ace Edouard Sales and Adj Chevalier) which collided during an exercise, both pilots parachuting to safety.
At 0535 on 10 May 1940, German forces launched one of the most significant military operations in history. By that date, the strength of the Armée de l'Air had decreased to 70 confirmed victories, the majority of them by the 11/25 equipped GG II/14 and II/5. In total, they had lost 15 pilots killed and 15 wounded, and lost 28 fighters. The bomber and reconnaissance units had, however, fared far worse.

Utilising the experience gained in Poland and Norway, the Luftwaffe had expected to find the French, and their RAF allies, unprepared for the initial strikes. In this they were to be generally disappointed. Expecting trouble, the majority of the fields housing the fighter units had been active since first light, with parades already in the air. At St Symphorien, two Hawks of GG I/5 had been on such a flight since 0445. One aircraft had been forced to land base by engine trouble, but the other, flown by *Capitaine* François Morel, continued. Suddenly he met a formation of seven Bf 109s. Morel attacked and was one down in flames, but he was immediately forced to land by a screaming dive to escape the rest of the pack. A friend of mine, Jean Accart, had already claimed a Do 17 in April, and by the time of his death in action on 10 May, he had accounted for ten aircraft confirmed and two probables. While Morel was downing his Bf 110, Accart was also embattled in combat with swarms of aircraft encountered, after his own take-off (with Czech ace Frantisek Perina).

"Rising out of the shadows in a rapid climb, with no instructions from fighter control, I set course eastwards, where I could see a cluster of condensation trails lit up by the rising sun. With Perina a little lower down and to the right, I climbed flat out towards them but was unable to reach them. I joined a patrol in the Second Army's sector, between Soucy and Verdin. The sun was up high when I spotted 15 black dots, keeping westwards and towards the south of our position. We headed for them, gaining altitude, for they were clearly higher than us. At about 3000 meters, we were close enough to identify them as Messerschmitt 109s.

"At that moment, they began a wide turn towards us. We were still a few hundred metres below them and I didn't think that they had seen us. My aircraft camouflage would be helping us in the terrain below. They continued their gentle turn and I decided that they had not seen us, so I gave the order to attack. We were only two against fifteen, so there was time for only one quick pass, firing on the climb. I broke away in a group of five Messerschmitts turned towards me and I looked for Perina, but he was nowhere to be seen. I found out later that he had continued to fire in the climb for too long and had dropped away in spin.

"These twin-engined Messerschmitts were very manoeuvrable, but I got away by gaining altitude. The enemy formation seemed to have broken up in confusion, and except for a group of five which had formed up in line astern, I attacked this group head-on and finally on the leading aircraft, which was also firing at me. I passed underneath him and fired on each of the others in turn. I was travelling in just a few seconds. The last one in line pulled up just as if the earth had given way under the feet of the aircraft. But to my surprise, the Messerschmitt's propeller stopped and flew off to the east. I continued 12 and looked for the others, but I couldn't see them against the glare of the sun, but I did see Perina climbing up to regain me.

"I was making my mind up whether not to chase the Germans when I heard *Adjutant* Buvard call over the radio to say that he was engaging a group of Do 17s near Reims, flying at 3000 metres. Buvard, who was accompanied by Sam de Goyot, also down one of the bombers, but then the Messerschmitts dropped an incendiary bullet in the thigh and just managed to make a forced landing at Wozy-Thiery before losing consciousness. Perina and I dived flat out towards the Do 17s, which were in sight, and attacked the bomber on the left side of the formation. He began to smoke, lost altitude and splashed himself all over a field near St Symphorien.

"Events unfolded at an infernal pace throughout the day. We had hardly been refuelled when we were ordered off to escort some Potez 65s which were carrying out a reconnaissance over the Ardennes. We passed over the enemy columns, which were pushing westwards, and had to dodge some severe flak. Back at St Symphorien, we were placed on alert. Two hours went by, and I was just about to hand over to someone else when a flare shot up from the command post, ordering us to take off. Just as I got airborne, with Perina following, the airfield was carpeted with bomb-bursts. Looking up, I saw what seemed to be a mixture of Do 17s and Bf 109s, diving overhead at about 3000 metres.
A furious battle developed. In the space of a few seconds I fired on a Dornier, went to the aid of a Carrara that was being attacked by two Messerschmitts, and shot down a second Dornier just outside Suppigs. Then, with Ferina still clinging to me, I climbed up behind a Dornier, held on his tail, and fired a long burst into him, yanking a little so as to take him from wings to wings. I was close enough to see the bullets strike: I ceased firing and throttled back in order not to overwhelm the target. The bomber’s motors were still running, but I saw one of the crew jump, his parachute opening as he swept past me. I pulled off to the right, a little to watch the Dornier, and at the same time to keep an eye on some enemy fighters which were approaching.

I saw a second crew member jump, but his parachute opened too soon and became tangled on the fuselage. I watched him struggling to free himself, trying to drag himself along the thread lines towards the canopy. He pulled himself forward a little, then lost his grip and slid back towards the tail. The Dornier began to smoke, the pilot bailed out and the bomber went into a vertical dive, dragging the trapped man with it. It impacted with a terrific explosion on the banks of a little river. I returned to Suppigs with Ferina as was falling, after having destroyed another Dornier near Dun-sur-Meuse. So, for me, ended the first day of the battle.

In the afternoon, the CC/II5 flew over ferrying operations, but the skies were cloudy and the pilots did not see any action.

On the second day, the Delage fighters flew at low altitude, but the Messerschmitts returned to attack at higher altitudes. The Delages were not able to take off before the German aircraft dropped some 50 bombs and destroyed six of the CC/II5’s aircraft. As a result, two pilots of the CC/II5 managed to take off among a rain of bombs and pursued the Heinkels responsible for the damage, shooting down two. On their return, they were reprimanded for not permitting the German aircraft to take off, which may be why their victories were not confirmed until the day after. Meanwhile, the Moranes of CC/II1 at Nort-sur-Escaut-Foyes were warned by the Italian air force, which was mainly operating in the area around Liège. Two Moranes appeared and engaged the German aircraft in a brief engagement, shooting down one of them.

Another casualty was MS 406 1/31 of the 98 Escadrille of CC/II3, which was shot down by a fighter near Chaumont. The aircraft was destroyed in the crash, and the pilot was captured and later released as a prisoner of war.

In the area of the Second World War, there were many air raids on cities and industrial areas, and the pilots of the CC/II5 were always on alert. On 12 May, the CC/II5 participated in a large-scale operation against targets in the vicinity of Nancy and Metz. The pilots of the CC/II5 downed several German aircraft, and the aircraft of the CC/II5 were also successful in other operations.

To protect the bombers and reconnaissance aircraft, the CC/II5 pilots were able to engage in close combat with the German aircraft, which were generally more numerous. The pilots of the CC/II5 were always ready to offer their help to other units and were known for their bravery and determination.

For the pilots of the CC/II5, the Second World War was a time of great sacrifices and challenges. They were constantly on alert, ready to take on any challenge that came their way. Their bravery and determination were a source of inspiration for all who knew them.
Too many of the Moranes ended their days like this one, S/nr. 162 (matricule 162) went down with GC III/1 until it was shot down on 26 May 1940, leaving its pilot with severe burns.

Half a dozen BF 109s, at medium altitude over Reims. In a swirling dog fight, the French pilots, six of whom would later become aces, Georges Baptiste, Camille Plabeau, Georges Tessonard, Roger Guieu, Jean Paulhan, and Jean Camenshek, brought down a Ju 88, four BF 109s and an unlucky He 112 which blundered into the area. The seventh pilot, Vincente, along with Plabeau, baled out due to battle damage, but not before the bombs had postponed their payloads far short of their intended target.

GC I/1’s official chronicler described the day’s combat in the following entry:

Wednesday, 15 May 1940. At dawn, while we were establishing ourselves in our new location, we were briefed to fly an air cover mission south-west of Charleville. Take-off was fixed for 1100. All available aircraft were to take part; there were only seven. The pilots were selected from the 3rd and 4th escadrilles of Vincente, S/nr Le Baptiste, S/nr Le Plabeau and Adjudant Tessonard from the 4th, Captaine Guieu, Adjudant Paulhan and Sergent-chefarist Camenshek from the 3rd.

We climbed without incident until we were over Reims, when we saw a superb V of nine enemy-engaged bombers heading south-west at 5000 metres. We decided to attack. They were escorted by half a dozen Messerschmitt 109s, 1000 metres higher up and a little behind. Le Vincente attacked, perhaps too soon. The Messerschmitts came down on us and we were forced to break away and dive for safety. Only Le Vincente stuck to the bombers and made several passes in the left-hand one (a Junkers 88).

Meanwhile, Plabeau, Tessonard and Baptiste were involved in a fierce dogfight with the 109s: each shot down an enemy fighter and then climbed rapidly to the aid of Vincente. Together, they shot down one bomber; the remainder dropped their bombs harmlessly near Warnuelles and we went after them.

Plabeau’s cockpit was smashed by an explosive shell and he was forced to bale out. Vincente damaged a second Junkers, then his engine was hit by a fuel tank and also had to bale out as his cockpit was filling with flames and his oxygen equipment was out of action. Meanwhile, Baptiste, Guieu and Camenshek had spotted a He 112 at low altitude, which they attacked and shot down in the forest of Silly l’Abbé. In the process Guieu flew through a tree top at full throttle; by some miracle he managed to reach base and land safely with great gashes on his wings.

While the Hawks generally managed to hold their own against the odds, in a single engagement, the pilots in the ten formaage flying Moranes had more difficulty.

With a number of pneumatic systems which often failed after the slightest damage, guns which frequently froze up and a performance not much better than many of the German bombers, it is surprising just how well they did. Again on 15 May, GC II/1 sent up a ‘pannaille triple’ (nine aircraft) and were attacked by an entire Staffl of BF 109s over Morincourt.

With a 60 mph speed disadvantage, the Moranes quickly found themselves in a situation akin to a wagon train surrounded by indians. Two soon went down in flames, followed by another three as more Messerschmitts arrived on the scene. Four Moranes eventually escaped, but the unit had lost two pilots killed, two injured and one missing. Despite this disaster, by the end of the day the French fighter arm had only lost 254 sorties and had claimed 25 confirmed victories for the loss of 20 fighters.

Some pilots, however, found the Morane could bite, as shown by Robert Williams of GC II/2 who, on 5 June, shot down three BF 109s in 15 seconds. Another ace, who made good use of the Morane was Jean Le Étienne Le Noyer of GC I/3, who claimed ten of his twelve confirmed kills in the MS 406 between 11 and 20 May. Tragically, he was to die of pneumonia in July.

As for the pilots of the nine Groupe de Chasse equipped with the Bloch 152 during May and June, every mission from which they returned was close to miraculous. Even unit flying the Bloch during May suffered some losses, some purely as a result of the Bloch’s lack of endurance – about 45 minutes at full throttle. In view of the type’s shortcomings, the Bloch was mostly used as a bomber escort. It was not successful. Groupe 21, which included four Bloch units, had lost some 43 aircraft in combat by the end of May. Even worse, production of the fighter could barely keep pace with the losses. However, two pilots in particular proved that the formidable armament of the Bloch could be put to good use.

Jean Le Robert, holder of GC I/3, who scored eight kills on the type, continued his experience on 3 June.

Our flight meets the Messerschmitt head-on. We break up into individual combats. Not seeing my wingmen, I wait to reassemble in the sector. Attacked from behind by a Messerschmitt which turns to the right.
with the following. The pilot does not bale out as the aircraft hits the ground. I am not able to check the point of impact as I am being attacked by more Messerschmitts. But Captain Chef Speake sees an aircraft fall between Boyne and Chantilly at about 1925. I am then pursued at tree-top height by two Messerschmitts for ten minutes; I make five attacks on the machine, disengage to the right and then immediately left, finding myself in an excellent close firing position. In a moment only single machine gun fires, then after two passes, no more. I return to base protected by the approaching defence flights."

Though all of this, in the early days the Dutch were very effective units. The other leading exponent of the aircraft was Louis Delbœuf, who scored six of his sixteen vic™es on the type.

By the end of that disastrous May, the Groupe de Chasse had destroyed 355 Luftwaffe aircraft for the loss of 166 of its own. As if in acknowledgement of the perilous military situation, the beginning of June found most of France shrouded in fog and drizzle. This limited Luftwaffe operations considerably, allowing a sorely needed respite for the Groupe de Chasse. Since the end of May they had been in the throes of a major reorganisation to take account of the changing circumstances. This was completed very early on 3 June.

Although D.520 production was beginning to gain momentum, allowing the desperately needed re-equipment of some of the battered Morane units, other types were also being introduced. Among these were the Caudron C.714 lightweight fighter, which was issued to the Pols of GC 1/44. A number of Polish pilots later fought with the RAF in the Battle of Britain (see Odyssey: Aircraft of the Airs 21: British Airs of the World War 2). For further details, see the situation that even the Dutch Koehoven FK 58 was given trials.

Until June the Armée de l'Air had been more or less holding its own against the Luftwaffe in the air. Events on the ground, however, were conspiring to destroy its combat ability. The French army could, and on occasions did, offer fierce resistance to the invaders, but years of social disconnection, a strong undercurrent of paci™sm and inexperience at the highest political and military levels led to a rapid collapse in the morale of the troops, causing massive problems for the air force as the army began to disintegrate. They had no answer, any more than did the British and the other European nations, to Blistingsen.

Aircraft would take off only to find on return that the army units around them had retreated in panic, leaving the airfields unprotected.
CHAPTER FOUR

TWO SIDES WITH THE SAME FLAG

Taking stock after the cease-fire, the French fighter force had lost 296 aircraft in air combat, 38 to land and possibly another 100 destroyed on the ground. It is a sad irony that the Armée de l'Air was in fact stronger after the defeat, both quantitatively and qualitatively, than in September 1939. In July 1940 the seven best equipped (II/75 and D.520) fighter groups had retreated to North Africa; three more were in Syria; II/109 was alone in Indo-China, and there were seven Escadrilles de Chasse, mostly equipped with Bloch 151 and 152, and two nightfighter Escadrilles on the Potez 631, in France itself.

As early as 25 June 1940 the first three pilots, including Albert Lavrillier, had flown to join de Gaulle and create the embattled Free French Air Force. Tragically, Gallia pride, still smouldering from the recent disasters, turned many against their erstwhile allies after the brutal attack on the French fleet at Mers el-Kébir on 3 July. This led the Germans allowing the new Vichy government to retain an air arm to be known as the Armée de l'Air de l'Occupation, based on the French colonies and the unoccupied zone of France. Consequently, some fighter pilots, obeying only the given word, fought for the wrong side until the demise of this air force in 1943.

Dakar

Following the attack on Mers el-Kébir by a reluctant Royal Navy, during which Sir André Legrand, flying a Cigognes Hawk of GC II/5, shot down a Fleet Air Arm Blackburn Siskin (the aircraft actually suffered no damage)

Caught and destroyed on the ground by bombs that had overwhelmed the rapidly thinning ranks of the French fighter force; this Breguet 693 lies among piles of ordnance somewhere in France.

At the end of the Battle of France, the countryside was littered with the wrecks of French aircraft which had tried vainly to halt the rout on the ground. This is a Breguet 693 light bomber, probably brought down by Fokker machine gunners.

BF 109s. For the next five days the pilote de chasse fought like true possessed, but forced to retreat from their bases in front of the advancing Germans, many aircraft had to be abandoned, and it became increasingly difficult to offer organised resistance — especially in the face of intense German flak. Even so, as more and more D.520s became available, the Luftwaffe was still being born, having lost 90 aircraft in air combat by 16 June; 36 Ju 87s were brought down by GC II/2 on 6 June alone.

On 10 June Moscardin, expecting an easy victory, declared war on France. Several pilots scored or became ace on that day. Jean Marie Hubert Morinasse of GC II/5 brought down the fifth (a Do 17) of his seven confirmed kills; Louis Papin Labazardiere of GC I/7, his sixth and seventh, both Dominers and Charles Chesnais of GC I/9 his fifth and sixth, a Do 17 and an He 116. Altogether, the French pilots destroyed 12 aircraft that day, including three He 116s by GC I/5. Four days later the Germans entered Paris.

It was clear that things were not going to be as easy as the Italians had thought when Pierre Le Glain brought down five Italian aircraft in a single sortie on the 16th, but the war situation was now inextricable. It was another nine days before an armistice came into effect, to the utter chagrin of the French fighter pilots who had fully expected to be blasting on from North Africa. In that time only another ten German aircraft were destroyed, but four more fighter pilots were killed and two wounded.

Altogether, 138 French fighter pilots had been killed and another 170 wounded while defending their country by 24 June 1940. In the greater scheme of things, however, an almost unnoticed event had occurred on 18 June which would, one way or another, affect all the surviving pilots. From a BBC studio in London, an unknown army general named Charles de Gaulle announced 'the war is not lost'.

Dakar

Following the attack on Mers el-Kébir by a reluctant Royal Navy, during which Sir André Legrand, flying a Cigognes Hawk of GC II/5, shot down a Fleet Air Arm Blackburn Siskin (the aircraft actually suffered no damage)

Seen soon after the Armistice, these Bloch 152s belong to the Escadrille de GC II/5. Nomment in s/n 636, whilst just behind it is '71', which is believed to have been the mount of the commander of the unit, Col. Louis Delattre.
for its eighth confirmed victory, the Vichy government took immediate action to reinforce their overseas possessions. The stage was set for Frenchmen to fight Frenchmen.

Meanwhile, Dakar on the coast of French West Africa (Senegal), was seen as a potential threat to the Allies as the French battleship *Richelieu* was berthed there. On the other hand, the part the port would be a valuable base for Royal Navy operations in the Atlantic if the authorities could be persuaded to join the Free French side. In September 1941 a large fleet was therefore assembled (including Free French vessels), which carried with it the 1st Fighter Group, manned by many of the first French airmen to join de Gaulle. Several of these later became aces with the Free French Air Force (FFAF), including Noël Cattiaux, James Denis and Albert Lefort. In the event, Operation *Amaric* as it was named, was a failure, and when the Free French emissaries failed to persuade their overseas colleagues to change sides, the Royal Navy took action.

The Vichy forces defended themselves vigorously, however, against a series of attacks by aircraft launched from HMMS Ark Royal which began on 24 September. On that day, Sgt Chef Georges Lemercier of GC 1/4 shot down a Swordfish for his fourth victory, and he went on to claim another one confirmed with the *Normandie Niémen*. During three days of operations the Fleet Air Arm lost eight Swordfish, two Stuarts and a Walrus to the aggressive French fighters, while several of the RN ships were damaged by gunfire from the *Richelieu* herself and bombing by *Aeronautes Marins* 145/7. On 26 September the Royal Navy decided that there was little profit in pursuing the exercise and abandoned the operation.

**SYRIA**

Mandated to France since 1919, Syria and the Lebanon had long been a bed of intrigue and tension. After the Armistice of June 1940, the authorities there rapidly decided to support the Vichy government. Large numbers of dissidents, including many Polish military escapees, then made their way to nearby British-controlled Palestine. Tensions were already running high between the various parties in the area when the Axis launched their attack on Greece and Yugoslavia in May 1941. This heightened fears amongst the Allies that the country might use as a base for operations against Egypt and the Suez Canal. When a rebellion threatened, British interests in Iraq, the French in Syria both supplied arms to the rebels and allowed the Luftwaffe to use airfields there as staging posts to support the rebellion. In this situation, and provoked by the Free French, the British had no option but to take action. Consequently, strikes by the RAf were mounted on airfields in Syria. Although three weeks passed by with inconclusive skirmishes between Vichy French and British aircraft, the Vichy government in France was so alarmed by the continuous attacks that they sent in fighter reinforcements in the shape of 27 MS 406s of GC 1/7 and 25 D 520s of GC 11/16 from Algeria.

After the Iraqi insurgents suddenly capitulated on 31 May, it was decided by the British, who were again urged on by the Free French, to invade Syria before the Germans moved in. In fact, the latter had already lost interest in Syria, regarding it as a sideshow, and left it to the Vichy French, who were determined to resist any encroachment. Unaware of this, on 1 June the RAF began attacks on Syrian targets, leading to a bitter contested campaign which was to last six weeks.

The first serious encounter took place on 8 June when Pierre Le Glas, leading a "pair Vive" from GC 11/16, met a reconnaissance Hurricane of No 208 Sqn over Damascus and shot it down for his 12th victory. Later that day, another six D 520s from GC 11/16, led by Capitaine Richard, met four RN Flyers over the contract airfield in CAP for a squadron of Royal Navy bombers. Two of these were shot down, one by Richard for the first of his seven victories, all of which were British!

On the following day, while protecting a bombing raid by the French on these same ships, Le Glas destroyed two of the Hurricanes sent to intercept the bombers, but was unable to prevent the loss of two of the Block 240s. In the middle of this spirited daylight three more D 520s, led by Capitaine Richard, and another three Hurricanes arrived in the
confusion, one of the D.520s and a Hurricane collided head-on, although both pilots were rescued from the sea by the Royal Navy.

As French resistance on the ground softened, both sides sent in air reinforcements. On the French side these consisted of two D.520s from GC III/3 and four MS.406s from a training school. Both sides undertook numerous bombing raids on the other’s ground forces over the next few days, and losses to the French bombers, in particular, were very serious. Due both to accidents and enemy action. The French fighters were having more luck, however, for on the 1st May Richard shot down a Blenheim from No. 11 Sqn, killing its entire crew.

At the end of the first week’s fighting the action on the ground was almost at a stalemate, but while the RAF had much the same strength as it had started with, the French sent in yet more reinforcements. These included 21 D.520s of GC III/3.

On 15 June six D.520s, led by Le Gloan, caught six Gladiators by surprise, one of the blotters being immediately shot down by the ace for his 15th confirmed kill. In a confused engagement one of the D.520s was also destroyed and another of the Gladiators severely damaged, as was Le Gloan’s aircraft, forcing him to crash-land back at his base.

Armourers are seen working on a Bloch 155 of GC III/8 at Marignane in 1942. A shark emblem of the Zone Escadrille can be just made out below the radio antenna. The machine wore full Vichy stripes and, surprisingly, still retains its matricule militaire.

A better overall view of a Bloch 155 in this instance s/n 707 of the 4ème Escadrille of GC III/8. This is the personal machine of the commanding officer, Cdt de Vauray.

The rudimentary design of the MS.406 is clearly apparent in the poor fitting panels on the engine of this machine, in service with the Vichy training school at Audon.

In a series of encounters between the two sides over the next few days, it was the bombers that suffered most, but the serviceability of the French fighters was also declining rapidly. On the ground, fighter aircraft was continuing, but a temporary stalemate in the Western Desert allowed the British to send in more reinforcements.

By 22 June – the day the Germans invaded the USSR – it was apparent that the influence of the Free French was beginning to effect the morale of the Vichy forces.

On the following day, the arrival of RAF reinforcements allowed a change of tactics. A series of strafing attacks on the French airfields commenced. After an initial interception of bombers at Uddevalla, the D.520s of GC III/6, again led by Le Gloan, were scrambled and soon encountered eight Hurricanes. In a vicious exchange four of these were claimed shot down, one by Le Gloan and another shared between Cdr Richard, Sg Maj Mettetan and Sg Guiraud. A third was brought down by Lt Marcel Steunou, who shared in a fourth with two other pilots. These two victories, plus a Fleet Air Arm Fulmar downed over Sardinia on 8 June and two German aircraft in France in 1940, made Steunou an ace. He did not get to enjoy his status for long, however, for later that same day both he and Sg Savarin were killed during an engagement with thirteen Australian Tomahawks from No.3 Sqn. Even though J.60 Richard destroyed one of the Tomahawks so that became
an ace, the remaining aircraft of GC III/6 were all roughly handled by the Australians, with Le Glaon’s aircraft being seriously damaged.

On 26 June the aggressive Australians caught the D.520s of GC II/1 on the ground at Homs and destroyed five, seriously damaged six more and shot up another eleven to varying degrees. The situation for the French airmen was depressingly similar to that which had existed in France a year earlier, when the absence of an early warning system meant that the fighters were often taking off as bombs were falling on their field.

The disaster for the French at Homs led to the withdrawal of all French fighter units to make replacement. For the rest of the campaign, French fighter strength was effectively broken, even though they were to exact a cost from both the RA AF and RAF before the end. The French bomber meanwhile (many from the Armée Noire), were to continue to suffer much as they had back in 1940.

On 2 July Sous Lt. Leblanc of GC II/3 claimed a Hurricane (not in fact lost) to add to the six confirmed and one probable German machines he had destroyed over France. Ironically, he was killed while piloting a Hurricane when he accidentally collided with a D.39 during a training flight on 29 January 1944. Later, 5 July, six D.520s of GC III/6 (as usual led by Le Glaon) shot down two Hurricanes, the kills being shared between Le Glaon, Meunier, Richard and A.Chef/Martin Leu. Leu was another French pilot to become an ace at the expense of the RA AF, this being his fifth confirmed kill in addition to four destroyed earlier with GC II/1 in France. He was killed on 27 July 1943 when he was forced to abandon his Anachora during a training flight. He bailed out but his parachute caught on the aircraft and he was dragged to his death.

Of interest during this campaign was the use of the MS 406 as a makeshift nightfighter, when GA/Chef attempted to use them against RAF bombers. Surprisingly, A.Chef-Adjutant succeeded in bringing down a Wellington of 70 Sqn on 7 July.
Heavy fighting was continuing on the ground, but the end was close. Both sides carried out reinforcing attacks on their opponent’s airfields, but the French were now beginning to cut their losses and withdraw their aircraft. On 12 July 1941 all fighting ceased, and Syria passed into Free French control.

The Vichy forces had lost 128 aircraft from all causes, but only nine fighters in air combat. They had claimed 34 confirmed kills in the air (RAF/RCAF losses actually 27). Their opponents claimed 37, against an actual loss of 26. Honours were therefore about even. The focus of the action was now about to move back to North Africa.

**Operation Torch**

After the stunning Axis victories in the USSR in mid-1942, there was an urgent need both to relieve the pressure on the Soviet Union and save Egypt. The Allies finally decided upon a landing in French North Africa which would both open a second front, and present the opportunity to finally defeat the Italian-German forces in North Africa. This would thereby expose the German’s southern flank, as the Mediterranean would be more secure under Allied control. Named Operation Torch, it was the first major Anglo-American military operation, and in the hope of lessening local Vichy resistance, was strongly supported as being a mainly US and Free French affair.

The need to occupy as much ground as possible before the Axis could respond led to the decision to land simultaneously in three widely separated locations. These were to be at Casablanca, Oran, and Algiers, the former being the exclusive responsibility of the Americans, while joint US/Canadian forces would seize the latter two cities. A disadvantage for the Allies was the ratio of objectives divided the available forces, but they had little choice in the matter.

Three separate convoys were required, each with several aircraft carriers whose aircraft were to cover the initial landings. Force “H” to Algiers was British, and included four carriers with a total of 148 aircraft. Force ‘O’ to Oran (Algeria) used three Royal Navy carriers with 59 aircraft; while the US Navy supplied four carriers for the Casablanca (Morocco) landings, which had 164 naval aircraft, plus the P-40s of a USAAF fighter group. German secrecy was strained, especially as the American force was sailing directly across the Atlantic. Additional air support was also to be available from forces specially sent to Gibraltar and Malta.

To oppose these actual armadas the Vichy French had 205 aircraft in Morocco, of which 78 were fighters (38 B-528s and 40 H-75s), shared between GC I/3, GC II/5 and Aéronautique Militaire of Algeria. In Algeria there were 160 aircraft, including 76 fighters mainly D-520s with GC II/3, GC I/13 (this unit had been previously numbered GC I/3, and returned to that designation on 8 November) and GC II/16. The Tunisian forces were the weakest with only 69 aircraft, including 24 D-520s of GC II/17.

Surprise was complete when all three landings began at 0200 on 8 December 1942. The first dawn strike at La Senia airfield, near Oran, by RN Albacore were intercepted by a dozen De Havilland of GC III/3 from the base, and in a swirling combat near the target, the D-520s claimed four shot down and two probably before they were set upon by the escorting Sea Hurricanes. Two of the bombers were claimed by Le Georges Blanch, who had already scored six confirmed Luftwaffe kills with GC I/3 in France. Four D-520s were shot down in return.

An attack at Tafnout by Sfinx of No 807 Sqn caught several bombers on the ground, and while returning, the fighters intervened in the fight with GC III/3’s described earlier, and claimed a D-520 as the first ever victory for the Sfinx. No 807 Sqn also destroyed several aircraft on the ground at La Senia for good measure. In return, ground fire shot one of the Sfinx down.

At about 0800 Sea Hurricanes of No 891 Sqn attacked La Senia. Having expended their ammunition, one was shot down, probably by Sous Le Michel Maury for his eighth victory—the pilot was unhurt.

It had been intended that US paratroops flown directly from England, should have been landed in La Senia, but the formation of US C-47s carrying them got lost and dispersed in bad weather. Ariving not after the
Two Hawks of GC 1/6 on patrol somewhere over Morocco in early 1942.

Two of the MS 406s which formed part of Free French Flight No 2 in Syria in late 1941. Nearest to the camera is s/n 821.

attack by the No 807 Sqn Spitfires, they were intercepted by the D.520s of GC III/3, which were still in the air, and a dozen were forced down in a salt lake some distance away and then strafed by the Frenchmen. Soon afterwards it was discovered that Taffanini was now in American hands, and the C-47s were instructed to take off again and divert to there. Those that could, but some had bugged in and were unable to do so.

Later that hectic morning, the Perenieres of GC III/3 were strafing over La Sénia prior to undertaking a bomber escort mission when a formation of fighters, which they took to be Hurricanes, appeared. They were actually Spitfires from No 807 Sqn, and in the empty which followed, one was downed by Sgt Penrith in exchange for D.520.

In mid-afternoon GC III/3 met yet more Spitfires of from No 807 Sqn over La Sénia. Returning after an uneventful bomber mission in which no bombs were actually dropped, a ‘patrouille double’ led by Capt Roger Duval, caught the British fighters attacking aircraft on the ground. In a brief engagement one was shot down by Duval for his fourth victory.

Later still that day the busy GC III/3 were strafing the airfield at Taffanini (then in American hands) when the US 3rd Fighter Group arrived direct from Gibraltar. Flying Spitfires, the Americans at first mistook the D.520s for Hurricanes, and in the confusion, Staff Lt Georges Pissotte shot one of the Spitfires down for his fourth confirmed victory. As soon as the Americans realised their mistake, however, they turned on the D.520s. In an unequal fight, Capt Ettlinger and Cte Moutier never had a chance, both being killed, while Sgt Penrith took to his parachute.

On their way back to base the six surviving members of GC III/3 came across the usually C-47s, which had landed earlier and were unable to take off. These were comprehensively strafed and three were destroyed and awarded jointly to Georges Blanke, Staff Lt Michel Madon, Staff Lt Georges Pissotte and Roger Duval. All four were already aces and, after 8 November, their next claim would once again be against the Germans.

For Madon these were his 9th-11th victories. His eighth had come earlier that day when he brought down a Sea Hurricane of No 891 Sqn. Blanke’s final kill was against an Me 323 transport near Bastia on 30 September (851). He finished the war in command of a fighter training school in Melun, Montceau. However, he saw action in Algeria again and retired as a colonel in October 1943. He died on 5 August 1990. As for Pissotte, he claimed an Me 323 confirmed and a Do 217 damaged in September 1943 to give him a final score of eight confirmed and a probable. After the war he served for 28 months in Indo-China, before returning to various training posts and retiring as a colonel in 1959. For Duval the C-47s gave him seven confirmed victories. His next claim comprised a Ju 52 confirmed, three damaged and a probable all on 29 September 1943 off Bastia (Corse) to give him a final tally of eight confirmed and two probables. Duval’s postwar career saw mostly involved in training and staff posts. He retired as a general in July 1963.

For GC III/3, it was with immediate effect renumbered GC
1/3, being officially credited with 17 confirmed and 7 probable victories while part of the Vichy forces.

After only one day the air fighting around Oran was effectively over, and the surviving aircraft began withdrawing to Morocco. Resistance on the ground continued for another two days—long enough to save the face—before Admiral Dallan, commanding all Vichy forces in North Africa, and previously a staunch supporter, changed sides and ordered a cease fire. The RN had lost a staggering total of 53 aircraft of all types, although most of these were put down to insufficient pilot training.

Over in Morocco the story was rather different. Initially, the defenders were confused and the American troops came ashore very quickly, but their inexperience kept them on the beach too long, giving the French time to rally. At dawn US Navy aircraft attacked ships in the harbor and carried out strikes on the airfields, catching aircraft taking off and causing great destruction. As the Grumman F4F swept in over Casablanca, six Hawks of GC 115's Lafayette were taking off from Camp Caza. Among the pilots were numerous from the fighting in 1940. One of the first was Lt. Pierre Villacaque, who already had five confirmed kills against the Germans. His patrol scored first blood when they downed an OS2U observation floatplane and disrupted the gunfire from the USN ships offshore.

At regular intervals more aircraft of GC 115 took off to maintain stranding patrols. At 0845, with the change of the air from aircrafts C60 Toulou, Villacaque was accompanying Lt. Fabre and Lt. Robert Huvet. A member of the Aéronautique Militaire since 1930, the highly experienced Huvet had downed five German aircraft in France and probably an RAF Wellington off Salerno on 2 September 1942. Today he was going to shoot down Americans. Another of the Hawks responding to the invasion was flown by Lt. Paul Abrioux, who was normally stationed at the HQ in Rabat. Joining in the action regardless, events on 8 November were to make him an ace.

As the latter part of the raid old Hawks struggled for altitude, the Wildcat of VF-41 began a high-speed pass across the airfield. They were engaged at that precise moment by the Hawks. Although GC 115 had 13 D.520s on strength, and the American pilots reported seeing them, in fact not a single one was used as the tank had no ammunition for its 20 mm guns. In a vicious and confused dogfight which raged over the field, the greater firepower of the Wildcats was telling. Five French pilots were killed in combat, four were wounded and two were killed in take-off accidents.

Apart from aircraft lost in combat, GC 115 had others destroyed on the ground, a total of 13 being lost in all. Among the dead were Tricand and Robert Huvet, but not before each had shot down an F4F. Pierre Villacaque was credited with one of the American fighters for his fifth confirmed kill to add to his two probables, but was wounded in the face. He later saw service in Tunisia and Italy, before being promoted to command GC 115 until the end of the war. However, he took on increasingly important staff and planning roles. In 1942 he was made a general, assuming the post of personnel director of the Armée de l'Air in 1949. He retired in 1971. Paul Abrioux claimed his fifth and final victory that day (an SB2C Dauntless) and remained in North Africa postwar. After serving with the UN in Palestine in 1948, he joined the French Air Ministry, but was killed on 17 November 1951 when he was forced to abandon the P-47 Thunderbolt he was flying and his parachute failed to open.

As for the US forces, they too had paid a price. In total, GC 115 claimed seven Wildcats and an OS2U for the day, although some of the fighters may actually have been SBDs. The French were not alone in misidentifying their victims. In an episode that typifies the poor general level of aircraft recognition at the time, that same morning the inexperienced American pilot of VF-41 shot down a twin-engined aircraft which they claimed was a L3O-5 off Pétrol in fact it was an RAF Hudson. The mistake was compounded the following day when VF-41 shot down an
This Curtiss Hawk of the Two Escadrilles of GC 1/5 is seen at Rabat, in Morocco, in 1943. The number '11' probably indicates it is the CO's aircraft.

Unable RAF PR Spitfire. All in all, it was not a good day for the pilots of VF-9, who lost six of their aircraft due to mechanical failures and bad navigation, without any help from the French.

As Monday 9 November dawned over Casablanca, five more pilots of GC 105 strafed landing craft at Fedala, and were lucky to escape with only minor damage. The Americans responded by sending up standing patrols of Wildcats to cover the fleet. An hour later, a similar attack by a mixed formation of Arrivée de l'Air and Armistice bombers, escorted by 15 Hawks from GC 1/5, was spotted by the pilots of VF-9. With the advantage of altitude, the Wildcats rapidly knocked down four of the Hawks, killing two of the pilots and gravely wounding Adm. Cpt. Georges Testard. The latter was a highly capable pilot, having claimed seven confirmed and four probable in France, most of them RFRs. Fortunately, he recovered in time to shoot down a Ju 88 off Oran on 11 April 1944. After the war, he had two tours in Indochina, interspersed with a stay in Morocco. He retired in 1966 as a colonel and died on 29 July 1988.

Lt. Camille Plouet, one of the best pilots on either side that day, with 14 confirmed kills and four probable kills from the French campaign, was killed. His aircraft was badly damaged and he had to make a wheels-up landing back at his base at Rabat, but was uninjured.

The only consolation for the French was when yet another GC 1/5 ace, Sgi Cpt. Joseph Brisseau, claimed the only Wildcat of the day when he downed Ensign Garber (who was untrained) for his ninth and last confirmed victory of the war. A year later he was flying a P-38 with the Americans. Postwar, he served mostly as an instructor until 1954 when he went to Indochina. He returned to France in 1956 and retired as a lieutenant-colonel in 1961.

While the pilots of GC 105 were fighting for their lives over Fedala, the Americans attacked bases across a wide front, destroying many aircraft on the ground. And although it was now impossible for the French to mount any kind of operations, the ground resistance was still strong.

By 10 November most of the surviving French aircraft had withdrawn to Melchis. With the fighters effectively pinned to the ground, the American aircraft were able to attack the Vichy ground forces virtually unopposed. Early on the morning of the 11th, General Naupla, the Vichy army commander, asked for a cease-fire, thus bringing the fighting to a close. On Friday 13 November final agreement was reached between all parties, and the French in Africa were all once more on the same side, and the Armée de l’Air de l’Armistice ceased to exist.

Any illusions that the remaining supporters of Vichy may have had about the true nature of their relationship with the Germans was swept away when that same morning the Wehrmacht extended its occupation to the whole of France.
WITH THE RAF

After the disaster of June 1940, these courageous French airmen, who first responded to the appeal of de Gaulle, or simply made up their minds to fight on regardless, made their escape to England by any number of daring adventures. Notable among these is Lt Pratot, who determined to bring the entire training school he then commanded in Britain. On 18 June 1940 he commandeered a fishing boat and brought 118 trainees, and the padre, to England. Others came along some via Spain or farther afield—fewer, such as Albert J. Butet, brought their aircraft with them. On 9 July 1940 this ragtag of mostly junior ranks was named the Forces Aériennes Françaises Libres (FAFL), At first, however, there were so few airmen that they were put under the command of the French navy, with Admiral Muselier at their head. It was Muselier who gave the FAFL their most famous emblem, the Cross of Lorraine.

At first Muselier was assisted by the nucleus of an Air Staff, made up entirely of reserve officers. In February 1941 Lt Cal Picquet arrived from French Equatorial Africa and was made Chief of Staff of the FAFL. He died of wounds received in action in North Africa in January 1942.

Late in the evening of 2 August 1940, the aircraft carriers Aigrette and Jeanne d'Arc were sunk by a British attack, which ended the French offensive. The French were now isolated from the Allies and the situation was critical. The French navy was destroyed and the French army was in retreat.

A number of French pilots also served as members of RAF units. The most famous among these is unquestionably Pierre Clostermann. Officially credited by the Air Ministry, with several British sources give him about 15 to make him their ace of aces. Clostermann scored his first kill with No 341 Sqn, but the majority appear to have been claimed with No 502 Sqn. Postwar, he described his exploits in the The Big Show. The majority of French pilots in the RAF also included James Denis, who had made a daring escape from France in a Farman 222 with 19 others in June 1940. Although the aircraft was not very fast, having learnt to fly in 1929, Denis thought he had missed his chance for combat. Brought to the RAF in 1940 by Irvin, he was stationed at RAF Abingdon with No 57 Sqn. With them, on one occasion, in the west of France, he shot down a Bf 109. On 23 April, 1941, Denis was shot down by Obo-Hoes-Joachim Muster on the French coast near Saint-Jean de Luz.

Denis then went to Syria, where his diplomatic skills helped prevent French airmen fighting each other, before returning to join the FAFL. HQ Postwar, he commanded the base at Bougie before retiring in 1953. One of the first French pilots in the RAF proved to be exceptional. Jean-Frédéric Decroix, better known by his nom de guerre 'Mornia', was discharged soon after call-up in 1938 as being unfit for military service. A civil pilot, at the outbreak of war he served as an interpreter with the RAF. After the collapse, and discovering an abandoned Bristol Bombay in June 1940, he flew this, along with 15 troops, to England. Claiming to be a fighter pilot, he joined the FAFL, then No 1 Sqn RAE, and proved to be quite a fine fighter. A report of his activities on 9 August 1941 read: 'A magnificent job of courage and skill. On 12 July, descending to low level he attacked and destroyed an enemy aircraft over northern France. On 27 July he sunk enemy mines with his cannon. On the 28th he shot down his seventh enemy aircraft. On 31 July, off Dunkirk, he engaged three Bf 109s in combat. He shot down two, damaged the third for his eighth and ninth kills. Sadly, after service in FAFL HQ and in France after D-Day, he was killed in a flying accident near Ruc on 18 December 1945. At the time of his death he had 21 officially confirmed kills and two probable kills, most of which were with No 91 Sqn. Not one was shared.

When it came time to form the first French fighter units, it was decided that they would have their own national character. But they would be integrated into the RAF, despite the misgivings of many who would have preferred to create a new national air force. Consequently, the first fighter group, commanded by Lt Cal Lionel de Manzie (who had earlier been involved with the Polish-managed GC 1/45), was formed. It had four squadrons: 1st (Fighters), with two D.520s; 2nd (Roustabouts) with six Blériots; and 3rd and 4th (Recce) with six L-18s each, and a pair of Caudron C.650s for liaison. The unit took part in the successful expedition to Dakar, where the Karachi was lost.

Simultaneously with the creation of the FAL in Britain, a few French airmen had found their way to Egypt from Syria. Formed from Free French Flight 1, 2 and 3, they were equipped with a miscellaneous collection of aircraft, many French, and a few Hurricanes. They fought well in the early desert battles of 1941, but had been wiped out by June of that year, and surviving pilots were incorporated into the RAF. Probably the most famous of these was Albert Lintot, who, on 5 May 1941, downed four Bf 109s over Tobruk to take his score to nine confirmed. Additionally, there were a few detachments in the other Free French territories.

It was with the arrival of Lt Cal Lionel de Manzie in England that the FAL
CHAPTER SIX

...continued by Ross Macdonald.

Was famed by the author as "English soldiers, with their extraordinary courage and resource, were more effective in the field than the French military..."...
Despite the relatively small number of French personnel in the RAF, compared to say the Poles, they were not left out. Bernard Dupuyer, born in 1917, had already served for three years as a pilot during his national service before being recalled again in 1938. Escaping to England in the USA in 1941, he joined the RAFL. After scoring with the RAFL, he became CO of GC 2 'ile de France' in April 1942. By January 1943 Dupuyer had seven confirmed kills and one probable. After returning from a mission to Canada in December 1943, he took command of No 341 Sqn 'Alouettes' in August 1944. Although remaining with the squadron, Dupuyer led the Illig Roy Fighter Wing for a time, the only Frenchman ever to command a frontline RAFL Wing. On 4 August 1944 Cdt Dupuyer parachuted into France to fuse with the Resistance. He was wounded two days later and spent a year in hospital. Peacewise, he was very active in civil aviation and became President of the Aero-Club de France.

Two other fighter squadrons were formed under the RAFL, No 529 Sqn or GC 112 'Georges', and No 345 Sqn, or alternatively GC 112 'Berger'. Both were formed on Spitfires in early 1944 from personnel who had previously served with the Vichy forces in North Africa. The rebuildable Jean Accaré commanded GC 112 (No 345 Sqn) until his posting to the USA in December 1944, although he did not score any more victories. Back in 1937, Louis Valdémoré had served under Accaré in GC 115. Now he joined his old friend and squadron commander in "Berger". On 11 May 1940, the parachute consisting of the pair, and François Morot, had been shot down by He 111. All three became obs while serving during the Battle of France, although Morot was shot down and killed on 10 May after ten confirmed and two probable. When Valdémoré joined No 345 Sqn he had eleven confirmed and four probables, one of his victims being a Wellington flown off Port Lympne on 28 August 1942. He was to score no victories with the RAFL: the unit was mainly committed to ground attack sorties. Valdémoré retired as a lieutenant colonel in March 1952 and died on 10 October 1974.

Although not technically a fighter ace, the famous press writer and author Alain de Saint Exupéry flew a number of hazardous photo reconnaissance missions in the F.5A Lightnings of 2/33 over the south of France in late 1944. He is seen here taxiing out for another mission. As a reserve officer in the Armée de l'Air, Saint Exupéry had flown reconnaissance missions in Potez 54 and Bloch 174s during both the 'Phoney War' and the Battle of France, before demobilisation following the Armistice. After spending two years in the USA, Saint Exupéry returned to his old reconnaissance unit in North Africa in June 1943 and flew two missions before being declared unfit for operational flying the was 43 years old, and in poor physical shape. However, he was returned to flying status by no less an individual than Gen de Faler, Commander of the US Air Force in the Mediterranean. Cleared to fly a further five missions, Saint Exupéry successfully completed eight from Daxter before being shot down into the sea by two pre-production Fw 190s on 23 July 1944 off St Raphael. His body was never found.
IN SOVIET SKIES

It was in Russia that the most famous of all the Free French squadrons served. Officially, the unit — to be known as GC III of the FAF — had its foundations in Dammarie, Syria, on 9 September 1942. This was where volunteers from the ranks of the RAF in England and the Middle East gathered under the command of Lt Pierre Toussaint (second in command was Cdt Jean Tulane, of whom more later). It was quickly decided in accordance with FAF policy that the unit would be named "Normandie." During the Battle of Stalingrad, while the Soviet administration slowly sorted out the many details for their passage to Russia, the pilots began training in October of 1942 at Rayak with two worn out D.520s. Finally, on 11 November the "Normandie" volunteers embarked on threeibs for Damascus and began their hazardous journey to Russia. On 29 November, in the middle of the Russian winter, the men eventually arrived at their training base at Krasno. True to their word, the Russians offered the French pilots their choice of equipment — Russian, British or American.

The choice of aircraft was made by Jean Tulane. After sorting various types, he chose the Yak-1 by account of a lack of maintenance, reminiscent of the D.520, much to the pleasure of the Russians. Conversion training began immediately on the two-seat Yak-1. On 22 February 1943 Jean Tulane became CO when Cdt Poux was posted to the French military mission in Moscow. The unit went operational soon after.

Jean Tulane does not figure in the list of French fighter aces, yet his account would be incomplete without recording the influence of his personality upon the Normandie Group.

Born on 27 October 1912, Tulane's father and two uncles were all airmen. Despite the death of his father in a flying accident in 1929, Tulane decided to become a pilot too. Caring for his brother in 1933, he showed exceptional talent as a pilot, subsequently serving as an instructor for a year. He was unable to take part in the defense of France as he had been posted to command the 2e escadrille of CC 17 in Syria. Relucting to accept the orders of Vichy, Tulane arranged his own "disappearance" over the sea on 5 December 1940 and flew to join the FFI in Palestine. After combat service with the RAF, he was instrumented in gathering together many of the men who formed the basis for the "Normandie." Tulane's evident piloting and diplomatic skills ultimately led to him being placed in command of the unit.

On 22 March 1943 the new "Normandie" took off for their operational base at Polotskow-Czar, north-west of Moscow. Just as the Red Army launched a major offensive on 5 April, while escorting 94-2 bombers, Priozern and Durand each shot down an FW 190 as the first victories by French pilots in Russia. Sous Lt Édouard Durand had also scored the first kill (on Hs 111) for his old unit CCII/II on 10 May 1946 with three more confirmed and a probable claiming before he was shot down from Oren on 14 October 1941, accompanied by Marcel Leveque and Marcel Albert, to join the IFL. After numerous missions with "Ile de France" in England, he decided to try his luck in Russia. Durand scored six more confirmed kills there before his death in action on 1 September 1943.

Cpt Pierre Poux poses in front of his Yak 9 with his two Russian mechanics. Poux had been the third CO of the Normandie Regiment in Russia.
A rare in-flight shot of Marcel Albert flying his winter-camouflaged Yak 1M '44 from Iwanowo in early 1942. The machine was this camouflage until April of that year.

July was a month of intense activity, with the Gruppe flying several missions a day. In the same engagement in which Ettoll and Casimir had been shot down, Pierre Pauvade shot down a Ju 87 and killed his third kill. In four days the Gruppe's pilots had destroyed 17 enemy aircraft in 122 sorties, but the cost had been heavy. Six pilots had been killed, among them Jean Tulane on his 40th operational sortie. Pierre Pauvade was the last to see Tulane, a few seconds later he was killed by the presence of several FW 190s above them, an almost pure summer sky. As he climbed into the sun the little white clouds came between us and bid him farewell.

As for Pierre Pauvade, he had six kills to his credit at the time of Tulane's death, after which he assumed command of the Normandie. The Soviet authorities were extremely anxious to discover that the unit now had only nine pilots, and to have them in place for any more combat missions with the Germans.

On 4 August the French mechanics with the unit were replaced by Russian, this decision having been made necessary due to the lack of men in the unit. Nevertheless, the pilots continued to reach the unit. Most of them were taken up by training and a new base at Smolensk, and by the end of the month the unit's score had risen to 41 confirmed kills in the months of operations.

4 September saw three LeCs added to the bag, and the score being Marcel Lafeuille, the great friend of Marcel Albert and Albert Dornand. The three had escaped together from Oran on 14 December 1941, and had all volunteered for Russia simultaneously. LeCours had scored his first victory in the same sortie and had been killed in action until 2 May 1943, but had not scored any more since. The Gruppe moved back to its original base at Moscow in the winter. When the Gruppe was back, it was not until the following spring that they returned to the Soviet Union.

In May 1944 LeCours returned to the front, and he continued to fly, but his number was 12 confirmed kills. When the Gruppe returned to its original base at Moscow, it was not until the following spring that they returned to the Soviet Union.

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On 23 June the Red Army resumed its offensive towards Vorstok, on the Polish border. After a period of little activity the unit returned to the air, and when Pauvade and Rene Challe each destroyed a BF 110 on the 26th. That same evening, a major operation involving the formation of Yekaterinburg, took place, one of 12 killed by Pauvade, followed by 17 led by Vignaud who were lost. They confirmed a dozen Fw 190s and shot down eight for the loss of two Yaks.

During a transfer flight to Moscow, in the USA, a pilot by the name of de Seynes was carrying his chief mechanic, and was killed in the fuselage. A fire killed the cockpit with no survivors, but de Seynes refused to hold out and abandon his passenger, who did. The engine was restored to the cockpit, and the fuselage was burned. The gallantry of the pilot made a profound impression upon the Russians.

Fighting intensified from 24 July, and the Normandie was entrusted with protecting the groups crossing the River Svir. Opposed to the Yak fighters alike, the pilots took down two Fw 190s and a Ju 87, Jacques André, when he landed, received a bullet in his chest, and fell back to be an exceptional instrument. In the crossing crash-landing both were killed. The gallantry of the pilot made a profound impression upon the Russians.

Throughout the summer and into the winter, Irribarne had scored seven confirmed kills (all fighters) by 18 January. He disappeared on a mission on 11 February 1945, somewhere west of Zinshuf, in East Prussia.

By 7 February 1945, the influence of the Luftwaffe had allowed the Gruppe to be divided into squadrons. Those were given names as follows: LeGruppe: Le Bourgeois, Le Bourgeois, Le Bourgeois, Le Bourgeois, Le Bourgeois, Le Bourgeois. A fourth squadron was added in April and named Le Bourgeois.

The unit had seen a significant departure on 16 February when the pilot of the Gruppe, Jean Diderot, returned to France from the Vichy cabinet. After a period of little activity the unit returned to the air, and when Pauvade and Rene Challe each destroyed a BF 110 on the 26th. That same evening, a major operation involving the formation of Yekaterinburg, took place, one of 12 killed by Pauvade, followed by 17 led by Vignaud who were lost. They confirmed a dozen Fw 190s and shot down eight for the loss of two Yaks.

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30 September, but as one was only a probable, he had to wait until 16 October when he downed an Fw 190 to become an ace. By the end of that month he had 13 confirmed victories and 4 probables. Postwar, he spent much of his career in the "Armée de l’Air" on overseas assignments. He retired as a Général de Brigade on 20 January 1962.

A lack of enemy aircraft started to create a desire for a return to France by the "Normandie-Niemen" pilots but the start of a new offensive on 13 October kept them at their posts. Suddenly, three days into the campaign, the missing 124 aircraft reappeared in large numbers, and for an intense period of aviation combat over East Prussia, "Normandie-Niemen" had their single most successful day. In an incredible 24 hours, the unit flew 100 sorties, escorting 126 Soviet bombers and 242 fighters and shot down 20 enemy aircraft confirmed, with 2 probables and 1 damaged. Not a single aircraft from the "Normandie-Niemen" took their charges, was lost.

Throughout October the unit was involved in heavy fighting. An unusual victory was scored by Joseph Rosso for his tenth confirmed victory on 18 October when he downed a Henschel Hs 129. Rosso had decided to join the Allied cause immediately after the armistice in June 1940. Stationed in North Africa, Rosso and two comrades burned an aircraft intending to fly to Gibraltar. Unfortunately, he force-landed in Spanish territory and was immediately jailed. With the aid of the secretary of the French military attaché, Rosso was given false papers and escaped. Once in England he trained, unusually, as a nightfighter pilot, and in 1941 he joined No. 255 Sqn, but virtue of his actions, he was one of the first volunteers for the "Normandie-Niemen". Scoring his first victory on 16 July 1943, Rosso ended the year with 11 confirmed and 4 probables. Postwar he remained in the air force, retiring as a general in 1971.

The unit made multiple kills almost every day in October, and their achievements were recognized by Stalin in an order of the day on the 24th. Five days later, "Normandie-Niemen" suffered its final casualty of 1944, although not in action; but in an accident. Jean-Jacques Mathieu had been a member of the "Normandie-Niemen" since summer 1944, and between 26 June and 24 October he had scored six confirmed kills (all fighters). On the 29th of the month, while searching for targets in the old German lines, he tooled on a mine which blew off a foot. In falling, he hit an another vehicle virtually severing his left arm. Rushed to hospital, he could not be saved and died, a victim of gangrene, on 2 November.

He was 26. On 12 December the longest serving members of the "Normandie-Niemen" received permission to return to France, and Col. Louis Delpute replaced Pierre Pauget as CO of the unit.

At the beginning of 1945, weather restricted most flying— at the time the unit's score stood at 202 confirmed kills. From 14 January the weather improved, and over the next few days, 36 German aircraft were shot down by the loss of a pilot. By now the "Normandie-Niemen" was operating from well within East Prussia, near Königsberg. Early February saw more claims, but Raffetu Hache did not return on the 11th.

On 20 February the unit moved to Wittenberg. At the same time it was gradually being reduced in size as the war moved to an end, the group surviving just 24 pilots and 24 aircraft. March proved to be relatively quiet, and General Petit, visiting the regiment, announced the formation of a second group at Bulla—17 pilots were already at training there. On 27 March the "Normandie-Niemen" participated in one of its last major contests of the war when three Fw 190s and two Bf 109s were downed near Pillau for the loss of Sols Le Maurice and Charles. The elder of the two brothers who served in the unit, Maurice, was 33 at the time of his death. He had escaped to Spain, but had been held in prison there for six months before being returned to Canada by December 1945, where he joined his brother René in their journey to Russia. He had ten confirmed kills and one probable in his name at the time of his death. In this same combat, fellow ace Pierre de Georget de Charbonaig was also shot down. Wishing to join the FFI, in June 1940, he had attempted to escape from his unit in Oran by taking an aircraft, but was caught and jailed. Released after two years, he flew for the BBC before joining the "Normandie-Niemen" in January 1944. Once in the USSR, de Charbonaig claimed seven kills in five months, the last killing the day before he was himself shot down into the freezing Baltic. Remarkably, he was rescued by Russian soldiers, and became something of an adventurer postwar.

On 7 April the unit moved to Blava, where they were shifted on the ground by German artillery six days later, causing the Group's last fatality of the war when Auguste Henry was killed by shrapnel. Ironically, he had scored the last aerial victory for the "Normandie-Niemen" (an Fw 190) only the day before. On the 24th, yet another replacement pilots arrived, and the veterans were notified of their return to France on the 30th.

On 8 May 1945, World War 2 finally ended, but the unit was not stood down until the following day. There was now a matter of a serious campaign of awards ceremonies, speeches, and parades to ensure, before the unit learned that they could take their aircraft home in return for their contribution to the war. This they did, but not until 20 June 1945 when 37 Yak-3 landed in Bourget. In 495 days flying, they had scored 273 aerial victories and 37 probables, but lost 12 pilots killed or missing. For the "Normandie-Niemen" the war was truly over.
CHAPTER EIGHT

ACES AND VICTORIES

To France goes the honor of producing the world’s first fighter ace. - Eugene Gilbert and Adolphe Pegoud in World War 1. With a fine regard for recognizing new feats of warfare, and the consequent awards to the pilots, the number of aerial victories required by a pilot to achieve ace status was quickly formalized by the French and set at five. This has become the generally accepted norm in France, Britain, and America, and varied in other countries, particularly in the Luftwaffe in World War 2, where the minimum number of victories required by a pilot to be recognized as an “Ace” could be as high as ten or more.

For a pilot aspiring to become an “ace,” he had to be able to produce proof of his claims. In 1914-1916 it was necessary for a fighter pilot to register an independent claim witnessed by a confirmatory witness. Unlike the RFC, no victory was awarded on the basis of a pilot’s word, and for that matter, the ace category was driven down by such criteria. Consequently, the French claimed the World War I rule only to confirmed kills. In World War 2, however, for some reason it was decided to allow pilots to claim “probable” kills, but these did not count toward the total needed for the status of ace. Shared victories were treated as a whole and added to the pilot’s score, but only the one victory was added to the unit tally.

On this basis, it has to be said, many of the French pilots have higher scores than if they had been tabulated under RAF, USAAF, or Luftwaffe rules. Thus, it is more difficult to compare the true number of victories claimed by French pilots within the Armée de l’Air. Recent research reveals how relatively difficult it is to confirm the numbers of aerial victories claimed by any nation in World War 2. In France, until 10 May 1940, it was relatively straightforward to confirm pilots’ claims as every aircraft mostly fell on French soil but the chart accompanying events on the ground in that summer, when many of the French fighter pilots made their reputations, rendered it much more difficult. The victory scores given here, therefore, are those officially recorded by the DIAA. Even so, comparisons are unwise with regard to the true achievements of the French pilots during the Battle of France. Suffice it to say that the French pilots who fought in that battle have earned their place in military history.

The actions of some of the French fighter aces of 1939-40 differ from those of most of the other combatant nations in some of the complex political issues which attended the French collapse in 1940. When Marshal Pétain created the government of Vichy, overnight he divided the nation and set Frenchmen against Frenchmen. How much the talk of “traitors” within France, which had led to the defeat or betrayal by the British at Dunkirk and in May 1940, influenced the decision by many to support Pétain is debatable.

General Charles de Gaulle and those who shared his opposition to the collaboration, yet, strictly speaking, the legitimate government of France was that headed by Pétain. During the war this situation caused much bitterness, with those who joined de Gaulle either being haled as traitors or reviled as traitors, while those who chose to stay and fight on the German side were labeled as heroes or traitors. None of the latter later joined the Allies. Outside France, this unhappy situation has left some bitterness towards those who served Vichy, even though they too have later joined the ranks of the free French. It is probably fairest to say that each believed he was serving his country in the way he thought best.

In a book of this size it is not possible to give proper recognition of more than a few aces. Those that follow are the arbitrary selection chosen to give an idea of the conditions and events which were familiar to many of them. It is worth noting that most of them were NECs at the outbreak of war.

Jean Accart

One of the most popular of the French fighter aces, Jean Accart was born on 7 April 1914 in Pénestin. After qualifying as a marine navigator in 1931, he served aboard the French steamship to passenger liners France and Le Golfe. Called up for military service in 1932, he was serving on the cruiser Bretagne when he volunteered for service with the Armée de l’Air. After the Armée de l’Air, the French equivalent of the Fleet Air Arm. He subsequently qualified as a radiotelegraphy officer at Auvillar 9 March 1933 and as a fighter pilot at Auvillar on 1 June 1933. In 1936, he joined the 5th Escadrille de Chasse at Évreux. By the outbreak of war, Lt. Accart was flying Hawks with Escadrille SPA 67 of GC 1/5.

This unit claimed 73 aerial victories during the Battle of France, now Captained Jean Accart being credited with a dozen of these confirmed and four probables. Possibly of even more significance, and a measure of his modern man, the unit had lost only one pilot in action. His career as a fighter pilot was ended on 1 June 1940 when, accompanied by his wingman, the Capt. Adolphe Frédéric Perret, Accart was instructed to intercept a group of Luftwaffe bombers returning from a mission over Châteauroux. Finding himself unable to make contact with his ground station, French radio and fighter direction techniques not being the best, he joined up with a patrol of 15,520s to intercept another Luftwaffe raid on Paris. While attacking the Me 110 he was struck by a bullet that penetrated between his eyes and lodged in his skull – the absence of armoured windshields on French fighters cost the Armée de l’Air dearly. With barely enough strength to move the cock pit of his Hawk, he paradoxed on the ground unconscious, injuring his left arm and leg in the process. The French-German
armistice came into effect while he was recovering from his injuries, after which he was tasked with the creation of the fighter training school at Salon de Provence. Later, when the whole of France was occupied by the Germans, Accard escaped to Spain. There, he was initially imprisoned, but was released and travelled to North Africa, where the Free French authorities made use of his experience by asking him to form a fighter group. This led to receiving command of GC 2/21, Armee No. 243 Spad, equipped with Spadis, the squadron later served with distinction over Normandy, Arnhem and Germany. In December 1944, Jean Accard was sent to the USA for staff training at Fort Benning, returning in 1945 as a commandant to join the inspection-general staff of the Armee de l'Air, Poitiers. Jean Accard enjoyed a distinguished career with NATO and SHAPE, retiring as a general on 1 July 1973. He died on 19 August 1992.

**Marcel Albert**

Officially the second-ranking ace, Marcel Albert was born on 25 November 1917 in Paris into a family of modest means. Obliged to work for Renault to support his studies in the evening and his dream of flying, he joined the Armée de l’Air on 7 December 1938 and was still undergoing advanced training when the war broke out. Posted to GC 1/6, he scored his first confirmed ace on 14 May 1940. Albert was given a probable against an He 111 just days later, but it was not confirmed until 1943. He personally believed that his first kill was a Bf 109 which was not confirmed. Following the signature of the armistice in North Africa, he escaped with Albert Dullier and Marcel Faivre to Gibraltar on 14 October 1941. They continued on to England, and GC 1/42, Il de France (No. 340 Sqn), with whom Albert flew 47 missions over northern France. In August 1942 against Marcel Albert volunteered for service with the Groupes “Normandie” in Russia, flying Yak fighters. He described the communist aircraft in the following terms:

Lighter and faster than the Spad V, I have managed to push it to 440 miles (per hour), more manoeuvrable than the Bf 109, which could perhaps climb better than us. With an engine comparable to an Hispano-Suiza, which never worked badly, and an all-metal nose, I flew the Yak-7, then the Yak-9 and Yak-11. I never knew how the Russian mechanics went about it. In any case, between the A-1 and A-9 there was a difference of some 40-50 knots. The A-7 in plan looked a little like a Messerschmitt. The Yak-9 had a range of some 800-1000 km more than the A-7, but a 400-600 km. The armament was changed - two machine guns and a cannon.

At 16 June 1943 Albert downed his first aircraft in Russia over Smolensk and, in July, he claimed three more, all fighters, to make 36. September saw him take part in the massive air battles typical of the Eastern Front at that time, and by year end his score had reached 15 confirmed and 2 probable. There was no uncertainty over the remaining eight kills: all were confirmed. Immediately postwar Albert served briefly in Algeria as the air attaché, before leaving the Armée de l’Air and emigrating to the USA.

**Pierre Boillot**

Pierre Boillot was born on 22 June 1918 at Hasteau. A career soldier, he gained his brevet (wings) on 3 July 1938 and was posted to the 4th escadrille of GC 111 on 20 May 1939, and went to Sevres when hostilities opened in September. Like the rest of his unit, Sergeant Boillot was responsible for the protection of the reconnaissance aircraft of the various units based within their operational area – the banks of the River Rhône extending from Rhin to Balse. Flying the MS.406, his first brush with the enemy (a Do 17) in November 1939 was unsuccessful, and it was not until early in the morning of 20 April 1940 that he scored his first victory, bringing down a Bf 109E of II/JG 54 over Belfort. On 28 May he scored in the destruction of his first He 111, following this the next day with a Ju 88 as a probable. During June he was credited with a share in another He 111 and a Do 17, which raised him to the status of ace. GC 111 then returned to North Africa, where it was re-equipped with the D.520.

The unit remained there until November 1942, charged with protecting Tunis. Operation Torch allowed the unit to join the Allied side, and it took part mostly in maritime convoy escort and coastal patrol duties, although Boillot managed to add two Italian Macchi C.202s and a Bf 109 to his score. It was not until September 1943 that Sergeant Boillot and his unit were chosen to land on Corsica, from where he operated in support of the Allied landings in the south of France (Operation Dragoon). During October he claimed two Ju 88s shot down into the sea off Ajaccio. Throughout autumn of 1944 and spring of 1945, Boillot, now a Sott Lt., harried the retreating Germans over the valleys of the Rhône, adding four more Bf 109s to his score, to make his final total 13 confirmed and one probable. Postwar, Boillot remained in the Armée de l’Air, serving further active service in Algeria before retiring in 1974 as a colonel.

**René Challe**

The younger of two brothers who both served with distinction in the Armée de l’Air, René Challe was born on 6 June 1913 in Besançon. A graduate of the Saint-Cyr military academy in 1935, he first joined a
to his surgeon. In the event, his arguments prevailed. At the Liberation, Général Challe was posted to the provisional government of the new French Republic. Postwar, he occupied a number of important command and teaching posts, before joining the staff of the Inspector-General of the Armées de l’Air, from where he retired as a full colonel in 1964.

**Louis Delphino**

Another of the great aces who served with the Normande Nîmoise, and one of very few pilots to enjoy success on the unfortunate Bloch 152, Louis Delphino was born on 15 October 1912 in Nice. Tragedy came early to Delphino when his father was killed in World War I. Like René Challe, Delphino was a graduate of Saint-Cyr. Promoted to Lieutenant on 1 September 1933, he joined the Armées de l’Air and received his wings on 27 July 1934. Posted to the recce and armament arm, Delphino secured a posting to fighters at France prepared for war in 1938, joining GC 1/4 at Reims. From 27 August 1939 (now a Capitaine and adjutant of the Groupe), he spent the ‘Phoney War’ based at Wee-Thyme, where he was little active.

On 10 May his unit moved to Dunkirk-Mardyle, and the next day a He 111 was comprehensively shot down by eight pilots of GC 1/4, among them Louis Delphino. That same day he was awarded a ‘probable’ Bf 109, and the same again on the 16th. On the 17th, he was transferred to line command and took over the recce and armament of GC 4/1, equipped with Bf 109’s, in defense of Paris. During one of the few free moments, he designed the famous ‘Marechal’ emblem of his new unit. It was not until the 28th that Delphino was able to add to his score when he shot down a Bf 109 and an He 111. Then, in five days between 3 and 10 June, he brought down an He 111 and three He 112s, plus a Do 17 as a possible, taking his total to seven confirmed and three probable. Despite the heroic efforts of the French fighter pilots, losses on the ground led to the surrender of 22 June.

For the next two years Delphino remained loyal to his unit until on 29 May 1942 he was posted back to his original Groupe GC 1/4, stationed at Delphino. His only claim for the period came on 12 August 1942 when Delphino and the 4e escadrille, downed an RAF Wellington off Dunkirk. Following Trends, a visit to the unit on 5 January 1943 by Free French General Giraud told GC 1/4 to join the Allied cause. Hoping to receive P-47 Thunderbolts, Delphino was disappointed to learn that his unit was to reorganize with American Maryland's for coastal patrols duties. On 11 January 1944, he volunteered to join the Normande Nîmoise.

Arriving in Russia on 28 February, he was posted to Commandant four months later, and rapidly familiarized himself with the Yak-3 regarded as the best fighter in the world. On 16 October the Normande began the great offensive into East Prussia. That day Delphino shot down a Bf 109 for his ninth confirmed victory, with an He 110 as a probable. A week later he claimed two more He 110s, one being confirmed and the other remaining a probable. In a period of intense combat, on the 23rd he destroyed another He 110, with a Bf 109 as a probable on the 24th. Promoted to second in command of the Groupe on 12 November, he was to score four more victories (full fighters) before the end of the war. On 26 April 1945 he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel, eventually retiring in Marseilles at the head of the Normande Nîmoise on 30 June. In the postwar years, Louis Delphino held successfully more important posts in the
Albert Durand

Born on 16 September 1918 in Grasse. Albert Durand joined the Aronde de Plaisir in April 1938 and showed early promise as a pilot, gaining his brevet on 29 July. He was posted to his first operational unit in August 1939, the 103rd Flottille, which, as a nightfighter, joined GC III/14 at Beaufre. Equipped with the MS-406, the unit moved west afterwards to Chantilly, tasked with air defence of the capital. There was little action during the period at the 'l'âge de guerre', and even a move to Reims forward duties for the reconnaissance aircraft of the 3rd Aronde saw no change.

Consequently it was not until 10 May 1940 that Albert Durand first engaged in combat, opening the war for his unit by forcing an He 111 to crash-land on the beach north of Calais. On 18 May he shared in the destruction of a Do 17 near Berre-sur-Mer, following this the next day with a Ju 109 as a probable. On the 21st he destroyed a Ju 88 dive-bombing near Compiegne, and his last victory of the Battle of France was a Ju 88 downed near Annecy. Following the armistice, GC III/14 was disembarked and Durand was given leave until 31 March 1941, when he was posted to Orléans with GC III/8, then flying the O 320.

The Marcel Leclerc and Marcel Albert. Durand found his new situation far from satisfactory, and the thought of returning to battle by an aircraft was repulsive. Consequently, by means of a fake name all three decamped to Marseilles with their aircraft on 14 October 1941 – as a curious consequence of this event their former unit was re-numbered GC III/3. Arriving in England on 19 June 1942, he returned with the RAF before joining No. 340 Squadron on fighter sweeps over the Channel and northern French coast afterwards, he embarked for Russia with Leclerc, bound for the Normandie-Niemen Regiment, following a conversion course on the Yak-1. "Jean Leclerc was awarded as exceptional," by Cdt Italiau, who was responsible for training the Normandie pilots.

On 5 April 1943 Durand shot down an Fw 190 near Reims, followed by another on the 13th. On 5 May he shared in his 126th with Garloff, and it was not until 13 July did he score again when he destroyed a Bf 110 for his eighth confirmed kill. Three days later he shared a Fw 190, downed near Keversk, and on the last day of August 1943 he destroyed an He 111 and damaged an Fw 190. However, on 1 September Durand simply disappeared while on a mission. He was 25 years old.

Gabriel Gauthier

Born into a family of doctors on 12 September 1916 in Lyon. Gabriel Gauthier was naturally expected to take up the profession. Interests in military matters from his early years, a career in military medicine seemed to be a logical choice. Finding, however, that he was more interested in sport, he eventually opted for a career in aviation. After failing his exams, he joined the Aronde de Plaisir in 1935. Finally, in October 1938, he was posted to GC III/7, then flying MS 406.

On 28 August 1939 Gauthier's unit moved to Laon, ready to oppose the Luftwaffe in the war which was now inevitable. The pilots were full of confidence, believing that the Germans could never beat them. Gauthier's first taste of success came when he shared in the destruction of a Do 17 of 4(F)/12. A month later on 21 December, while escorting a reconnaissance from 607/6, his unit engaged a dozen BF 109s. While observing the actions of one lighter that headed just above him, his aircraft was seriously damaged by another which had latched on to his tail. Gauthier was seriously wounded in the ensuing crash and did not return to operations until long after the armistice.

When he eventually rejoined his unit, it had moved to North Africa where it was re-equipped with Spitfires in late 1943. It was flying in support of operations over Gerona when he added to his score, destroying two Bf 109s and damaging one Dornier Do 17 and a Savoia Marchetti SM 79 and claiming another Ju 88 as a probable on 28 September and 17 December 1943. Promoted to capitaine, and given command of the 2e escadrille; he took part in operations in support of the landings in Provence, where he was again shot down and wounded, this time by flak. He was saved from the Gestapo by members of the Resistance who eventually got him safely into Switzerland. Recovered, he again rejoined his unit in time to share in the destruction of three more BF 109s in the December 1944 and the end of the war.

Postwar, he was sent to America for staff training before returning to France to occupy progressively more senior positions in the Aronde de Plaisir. This culminated on 1 December 1969 when he was appointed Chief of Staff, a position he held until his retirement in December 1972.

Edmond Guillaume

One of the older fighter pilots of the war, Aronde de Plaisir Edmond Guillaume was born on 31 January 1904 at Oloron-les-Bains. He gained his wings in autumn 1924, and for many years afterward served in the Armée de l'Air, as a flight instructor, only slowly climbing the promotion ladder. A week before the outbreak of war, Ed Guillaume was called to active service with GC III/14, but it was not until the beginning of the Battle of France that he opened his score, sharing in the destruction of an He 111 over Belgium on 11 May 1940. Although 36 years of age...
Pierre Le Glaon

Possibly the French fighter ace best known to the British, the originaire Pierre Le Glaon came from a humble background. Born the son of a peasant in Kergeria-Maizoun on 6 January 1913, Le Glaon obtained a state scholarship in order to satisfy his passion for aviation, and allow him to join the Aéronautique Militaire in December 1931. On 7 August 1932, Capitaine Le Glaon received his brevet. Volunteering to extend his service resulted in a posting to the 1er escadrille de chasse in September 1933. In gunnery practice he was among the best in the group, and his ability to lead a formation led to his appointment as commandant de patrouille flight leader on 20 October 1936. In February 1938 he was recognized as a future NCO, and went on to North Africa.

On 1 May 1939 GC III/6 was formed at Chatte, 1er Ch. Le Glaon becoming a member of the 5th escadrille. Equipped with the MS 406, the unit transferred to Béja-Bouïlans on 5 September 1939 with the task of protecting Paris and the Loire Valley. The memory of the “dash de la voiture” and the absence of any real action, upset the morale of the unit until 15 November, when GC III/6 moved to Vieux-Berquin in the ZOA, where a day later, in company with Robert Martin, Le Glaon downed a Do 17 Z (540122) near Verdun, thereby opening the score for GC III/6.

There followed a long period of waiting, broken only by intermittent attacks by the Messerschmitt Bf 109, and it was not until 2 March 1940 that, again with Martin, he scored his unit's second victory - another Do 17 Z south-east of Brouage. On 11 May he shared in the destruction of a He 111, as well as claiming a second as a probable. Three days later he was again given a share in destroying yet another He 111. At the end of May, GC III/6 withdrew to Scapa Flow with the D 520.

On 10 June Mussolini decided to attack France as well, and three days later AdjLt Le Glaon downed two Italian Fiat BR.20 bombers. Two days later there followed the episode which was to give him immortality when he became one of the first pilots in World War 2 to claim five victories in a single sortie - namely four Fiat CR.42 gnat fighters and another BR.20. With 11 confirmed kills, Le Glaon was now the premier ace of his Gruppe.

When the Franco-German armistice came into effect, Le Glaon and his unit retired to North Africa. In May 1941 GC III/6 was ordered to participate with the Germans in operations in Vichy-controlled Syria, where the bitter fratricidal struggle between Vichy and the Free French was to claim its first French fatalities. On 10 August 1942, Le Glaon downed an RA 118 Hurricane and a Gladiator to raise his score to 18 confirmed and three probables. Following Operation Torch, the remaining Vichy forces in North Africa at last joined the Allied camp. Among them was Lt Pierre Le Glaon. On 13 August 1943 he was given command of the 3e escadrille of his Gruppe, now re-named ‘Mittelstürmer’ and equipped with P-39 Airacobras. It was at this point that Le Glaon’s passion for aviation was to claim his life. On 11 September (the anniversary of the death of legendary World War I ace Georges Guynemer, which most other pilots were commemorating), Le Glaon and Sgt Colcord took off early in the morning for a coastal escort mission. As they crossed the coastal Colcord noticed that Le Glaon’s P-39 was emitting black smoke. Returning to base, the engine suddenly stopped and the airframe appeared to be on fire. Unknown to either pilot, Le Glaon’s self-destruct had failed to release, and the impact hit the ground his aircraft burst into a fiery explosion.

Albert Littolf

Fired by a passion for aviation of almost religious proportions, Albert Littolf was born on 31 October 1911 in Connemara. One of eight children, he reached an early age that the only way to better himself was through flying. Joining the Aéronautique Militaire, he obtained his wings on 31 July 1931 and passed out first in his class. Posted to the 7e Escadrille d'Issy, his flying abilities were soon recognized by his commanding officer, who had formed an aerobatic team and included Littolf in it.

A brief posting to North Africa in 1938 with GC III/6 was not to Littolf’s liking, and he requested a transfer back to France. So it was that he was with GC III/7 when the German forces broke through at Sedan, and on 12 May 1940 he shared in the destruction of a Ju 88 with his wingman. Flying one of the D 526s, Littolf then shot down four He 111s, 12 Dorniers and a probable Bf 109 (all shared) in less than a month.

Promoted by the Armistice, Littolf and his colleagues responded to the appeals of de Gaulle, flew from France to England, where they landed almost out of fuel. There, he was one of the first six pilots to form the 7 e escadrille of the Free French GC III/2 on 13 December 1940. Soon afterwards this unit was sent to relieve GC III/6.

Recalled to Britain in March 1942, Littolf met Gordon Tuke again, who was by then recruiting for the new GC 3 (the future ‘Normandie-Niemen’). After training at Leiston throughout the winter months, the ‘Normandie’ eventually reached the front on 22 March 1943. As intense man, Littolf was recalled by one of his comrades.
At war's end Madon went back to France, only to hear of his brother's death on 6 April. He followed a series of staff and command promotions until, in September 1939, he became Inspector General of the Armée de l'Air. A terrible accident on 14 April 1972 killed his wife, and Madon was devastated. He never recovered and died a month later on 16 May.

**Edmond Marin La Meslée**

The most successful of all the French pilots who participated in the Battle of France, Marin La Meslée was born in Valenciennes on 5 February 1912. After high school, he studied at the Maurice Saltus school and gained his pilot's brevet on 1 August 1931. Preparing for a reserve officers' course in November that year, he was posted as a Spad 15 on 20 September 1932. La Meslée was then posted to the 2nd Regiment de Chasse in Strasbourg, and at the end of his year's service, he was sent on for further training with the 3rd Regiment de Chasse in Strasbourg. In September 1936 he decided to make a career with the Armée de l'Air, being posted as a Spad 15 in October 1937 to SPA 70, part of GC 43. He was flying Hawks with the 1st Escadrille in this unit when war broke out.

By 27 July 1939 GC 43 had moved to its operational base at Saint-Omer. For the next six months Marin La Meslée waited for an opportunity to carry out the job he was trained for. Contacts with the enemy were rare at that time, and on 15 January 1940, he finally caught a Do 17P of L 24 (4/18) over Verdun, bringing it down with the help of Spads La Réve and La Réve. He described the action as follows:

> I was on patrol with my wingman, Spad 15 at 4000 metres when I suddenly spotted a splendid Do 17, heading for Belgium about 200 metres below us and two kilometres away. I warned my wingman, then placed the sun at my back and struck from astern. The German machine-gunner opened fire when I was about 400 metres away. I manoeuvred to throw him off balance, closing at the same time, and opened fire at 200 metres. I gave him several bursts, closing at 800 and had a break and fired my wingman had his turn. The German gunner was firing at me at all times, but his bullets went wide. I could see my own bullets hitting the fuselage and engines, and debris smashing his aircraft.

> The Dornier flew straight on and I came in for a second attack. More debris hit my aircraft, and I spun my wheels down. I thought that I had been hit and broke away, but just as I was preparing to fire the Dornier went into a vertical dive. He must have been flying badly, because he was losing speed and his engine was belching smoke. Ray fired in the dive, broke away, and I took over. The Dornier levelled out at 2000 metres, then went into a dive once more and turned towards the border. We took it in turns to fire at him, not giving him a moment's respite. The German gunner was still firing, and it seemed likely that the Dornier might escape, because we were very
close to the border. I remember shouting words of encouragement to my wingman. We were now very close to the ground, so close in fact that I had to break off an attack. A moment later, I had the immense satisfaction of seeing the Dornier make the landing field. On returning to base, I learned that he had come down only a kilometre from the fortress, the crew had been taken prisoner, and only one of them was wounded. My aircraft was unscathed, although my wingman had been his five times.

His next victories were gained on 12 May, two days before the German assault began in earnest when his *patron* caught some 20 Ju 87s dive-bombing French industry in the Antwerp. Catching the stricken without fighter cover, slaughter ensued. Add-ons were claimed by GC 115, three being confirmed, and a fourth downgraded to a probable for La Mekład himself. The next day, he got a Bf 109, from 15 to 26 May his concentrated action as attempts were made to halt the invasion. On the 13th, he shared an Hs 126, the next day a Do 215, on the 19th three Hs 111s in a formation of 21 and on the 20th another Junkers bomber. There was a brief lull until the 24th, when he downed an Hs 126 near Saint-Louis, with another shared the next day. This was followed by an Hs 111 on the 28th, which La Mekład shared with eight other pilots from his group. Always accompanied, he frequently returned with his Hawk full of holes, and in recognition of his fighting spirit, La Mekład assumed command of his group. After 15 days he was hospitalized on 15th.

The battle was being lost, but the fight was not yet over. On 19 June he shared in the destruction of another Hs 126, with a Do 17 as a probable, and four days later, over Tours, he claimed two more probables (2 Ju 88 and another Hs 126). There was no uncertainty over his last kill, however, as the Ju 88 crashing near Chatillon sur Bar on the 12th to give him 16 confirmed and four probables. On 25 June GC 115 was in Algeria.

For the next two-and-a-half years, Mari La Mekład waited for his opportunity to resume the fight. After the *Torch* landings, his group re-equipped with P-39 Airacobras and carried out convoy escort and coastal patrols. In winter 1944–45 his unit was involved in patrolling the town and, on 1 February 1945 near Mari La Mekład led his unit, now named *Groupe* and flying P-47 Thunderbolts, in an attack on a German vehicle convoy in the Front Line. On this front, a whole town into flames, giving off dense smoke which obscured his vision. As he attempted to climb away, he was hit by a 60-mm shell and crushed. Pulled from his cockpit by the Germans, he was found to have received a fatal shrapnel wound to the head. Today, a giant stone star in the style of the French pilot's badge marks the place where he fell.

**Eugeniusz Nowakiewicz**

Among the ranks of the *Armée de l'Air!* Battle of France aces are several who are not French at all. After the fall of Poland, many Polish airmen fled to France in order to continue the fight, among them Eugeniusz Nowakiewicz. Born on 2 January 1919 at Jasio, little is known of his previous service in the Polish air force, except that he held the rank of fighter pilot. After arriving in France, he volunteered for service with the *Armée de l'Air* and was posted to GC 117, which he joined on 29 March 1940. Flying an MS-406, Capitaine Eugeniusz Nowakiewicz's most notable victory was a shared Hs 111 on 11 May.

He followed this with a Do 215 'probable' over Germany on the 29th. On 1 June he knocked down another Hs 111, with two more Do 215s confirmed on the 5th and 10th. His final victory was a Do 17, again over Germany. With the French collapse he escaped again, this time to England, where he joined the RAF. That is known of his later career is that he served with No. 102 Sqn from 1 August 1940 until 2 July 1942 with the rank of Flight Commander. When he disappeared.

**Frantisek Perina**

Other refugees from Nazi oppression to find temporary sanctuaries in France were the Czechs among them Frantisek Perina. Born in Mokra v Orlickych horach on 8 April 1911, he joined the Czech Air Force in 1929. He represented his country, flying an Avia B.534, in the Zurich International Military Competition, where he was regarded as being one of the best marksmen. Following the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, he escaped in 1939, making his way to the French Foreign Legion before joining the *Armée de l'Air* as a Sergeant. Promoted to Lt, he joined Accas's GC 115, flying several times as Accas's wingman.

On 10 May, the pair downed four Do 17s between them, following this the next day with an Hs 126. The 12th was the great day when GC 115 knocked down a down a Ju 87. Perina's personal score being two confirmed and two probables. On the 18th he shared another Hs 111, and another the day after with the indubitably Martin La Mekład. A week later another Hs 111 suffered at the hands of GC 115. Perina's last victory in the Battle of France was yet another Hs 111, again with Jean Accas, to bring his total to 13 confirmed and 2 probables. During this action he was shot down by a Bf 110 and crashed. Emerging from hospital, Perina flew his Currais H-25 to North Africa, but then decided to continue his personal battle and made his way to England, where he joined the RAF. With No. 512 Sqn, he scored only one more victory before the end of the war.

Escaping from Czechoslovakia in 1948 after the Communist takeover, he rejoined the RAF. After his enforced retirement from flying in 1953, Perina emigrated to Canada and the USA, where he became a successful businessman. The great changes in Europe since the end of the Cold War finally enabled him to ultimately return to his native country.

**Albert Petitjean-Roger**

The eldest of all the French fighter aces was born on 15 January 1918 in Touloise. An entrée into the military academy of Saint Cyr in October 1924, he was promoted to *sous lieutenant* two years later and obtained his pilot's license in 1927. In April 1930 Lt Petitjean-Roger embarked for Morocco with the 7th Aviation Regiment to take part in the operations against the rebel tribes in the Atlas Mountains. An observation specialist, he was noted for his coolness under fire, his courage and his ability to command. He left Morocco in July 1935 as a *capitaine* returning to France for a staff course, after which he served at GHQ before being nominated for the military academy in Dourdan. In May 1938, General Vandelain, Chief of Staff of the French Air Force, asked Petitjean-Roger to command the 2nd Group of the 1st Escadrille of 4th Wing of the 1st Air Group. Promoted to Commandant, his next posting was to the CIC ad Charles until 25 March 1940, when he was given command of GC 112, equipped with H-25s.

When the Battle of France opened in May, he quickly demonstrated
his ability by downing an He 111 near Vottem. On the 20th he shared in the destruction of a Do 17, and on the next day claimed an He 116. His last kills were on 518 (JG 26) and 10 (108) June. Posted to North Africa after the armistice, on 1 August he was recalled by général Vaillant to be his ADC. Two months later he joined général Weigel's staff, to which he served until he was killed in an air crash on 19 April 1941.

Camille Plubeau

One of the few fighter aces who originally wished to be a reconnaissance pilot, Camille Plubeau was born in Amiens-Haut on 6 January 1910. A keen cyclist, he became inspired by the exploits of the likes of Lindbergh and Mermoz. Subsequently, when the time came for his military service, he applied to join the Armée de l'Air and was accepted. In 1932 he joined the escadrille M. 130 in a dozen. As a fighter pilot, he showed great skill and resourcefulness, which enabled him to become a successful reconnaissance pilot. In 1939, he served in the 34th Aviation Regiment during the World War, where he gained victory over the enemy. However, before he could further pursue his combat career, he was killed in an air crash on 19 April 1941.

René Ponnier Leyrargues

Despite having a combat career lasting only a few months, René Ponnier Leyrargues earned the respect and admiration of his fellow pilots for two things—his unassuming character and the fact that he shot down the German ace, Werner Mölders. Born in Montpellier on 1 November 1916, he began his pilot training in 1936. In 1937, he underwent the advanced fighter course at the CFC in Chartres. On 12 March 1940, he was posted to a new operational unit, GC 117. The unit had been tasked with protecting reconnaissance aircraft operating within their sector, and due to the situation of the "défense de la France," many aircraft flew on both sides, sometimes even shooting at each other. Combats and victories were therefore rare, and during the bitter winter of 1940–1941, the unit scored only six kills.

By May GC 117 had started operating over the Vosges, and on the 11th René Ponnier Leyrargues shared in the destruction of an He 111 near Brassy. On the 18th it was a Do 17, and this was followed by two more He 111s on 24 and 25 May. By June the Panzer columns were smashing their way deep into France, and the 5th Panzer Leyrargues was among the eight pilots of GC 117 that were bounced by 12 Bf 109s of JG 53, led by none other than the great Werner Mölders himself, after scrambling to intercept a raid. At that time the leading German ace had 93 victories to his name, and in the ensuing dogfight, Ponnier Leyrargues shot him down (Mölders apparently never saw his opponent). Another Bf 109 was claimed by the Frenchman before he was overwhelmed by the weight of numbers and shot down in flames, crashing to his death in L 5320 to 260 near Mortain. His final combat with Mölders left him critically wounded in both hands and legs.

Pierre Puyade

Pierre Puyade was the third ace among French pilots, the virtuosity of the fact that he started his combat career as a nightfighter pilot. Born in Bordeaux on 25 June 1911 as a military man, he was in no hurry to head for a career in the army. A brilliant student, he came 24th out of 46 in his entrance exams for Saint Cyr, where he enrolled in 1930. Two years into his course, he decided that his future lay in aviation and gained his wings at Versailles in 1935. Later he was posted to the 6th Escadrille.

In December 1936 he moved to the 4th Escadrille of GC 114. Promoted to Capitaine in June 1939, his combat record included, among others, the destruction of a Do 17, during the Battle of France. He, after losing his life in the course of the conflict, was listed as killed in action.
severely critical of the aircraft and the power that he, stating: 'We had driven around throughout the winter after the German aircraft without ever being able to catch one. Why? Because the French nightfighters had made little progress since 1941. I still do not understand why the French High Command ordered and placed in service a nightfighter which was destined to be useless.'

Despite having downed an He 111 on 20 May, the Avro Anson left Pauvade with a feeling of deep dissatisfaction with his attempts to defend his country. Rather than remain inactive in a France which had fallen under the control of the Germans, he volunteered for service in the colonies, with a wish to be sent there as quickly as possible. In October 1940 he received his posting to Indo-China, and on 23 November he embarked with 900 other men on a vessel intended to carry 30 civilian passengers. After 48 days at sea (26 without stopping) he reached Saigon, where, at the end of this dreadful journey, he was posted to EC I/235, flying the MS 406, where he assumed command.

Very quickly he realized that the French were collaborating with the Japanese, and obliged to Moreover to maintain both his men and aircraft, he was forced to attack on sight, without warning, any American aircraft flying over Tonkin. When he heard that his superior had handed over to the Japanese an American flyer who had been shot down near the Chinese border, and who had subsequently been ordered, he realized: 'I decided to leave to escape'.

On 2 October 1942 he put his plan into operation. After sealing an elderly Peter 25 at Hanoi, he was warmly welcomed by the Free French at Changchung. Four months later, on 5 February 1943, he landed in England. There, he received a telegram from his friend Jean Talanque inviting him to join GC 3 (the 'Normandie' regiment), which had been in Russia for several months. After volunteering, General Valin charged him with finding on other pilots. This he did, and on 14 May 1943 Col Pauvade embarked with his men on a new voyage.

On 9 June they were in Russia, ready to take on the Luftwaffe. On Battle Day (4 July) he shot down a Bf 109, followed the next day by a Ju 87 and a Ju 88, which brought his score to six confirmed and three probables. On 17 July he was promoted to command the 'Normandie' after the death of his friend Jean Talanque on a mission.

In October he destroyed an He 126 and two Ju 88s. Apart from the dangers of combat, Pauvade also had to contend with other problems affecting his unit. Far away the most important was the question of replacing combat casualties, and he decided to journey to North Africa in late 1943 in search of reinforcements. At the end of the war, Lt Col Pauvade and his men, finally returned home on 29 June 1945.

Named Inspector of Fighters in 1945, and then joined the staff of President Auriol in 1947. Between 1950-53 he was military attaché in Bangkok and returning home as a General. Upon his retirement in 1955 Pauvade entered politics, finally retiring from office in 1979.

Leon Richard

Leon Richard is unique among the ranks of the French aces of World War 2, as he is the only one never to have shot down a German aircraft. Born on 7 August 1910 in Paris, he gained his wings in 1929, but it was not until 1933 that he became a career NCO. On completion of his course in July 1935, he was posted to the 3rd Escadrille. In November 1937 he was given command of the reconnaissance unit GAR 571 in Algeria, and although he briefly returned to France in April 1940 to command the 1st Escadrille of GC I/199, he was posted to Tunisia with his unit on 6 May.

On 31 August 1940 he was in command of the 1st Escadrille of GC I/199 flying D 520s, this unit playing an active part in the campaign in Syria. It was during this brief, but bitterly fought, campaign that his unique combat career began, as all signs of his victories were against the British. On 3 June 1941 he shot down a Heinkel of the Royal Navy, and the next day he destroyed a Hurricane. Friday the 15th was unkind for a Blenheim of No 11 Sqn and its crew, which encountered Richard on that day. On the 21st he brought down another Hurricane and a Tomahawk. Again, on 5 July, he destroyed another Hurricane, and after the withdrawal of all pro-Vichy forces from Syria, Capturan Richard and his unit returned to Algeria. It was from there, while carrying out a defensive patrol, that he claimed his seventh and last victory, a Royal Navy Fulmar, on 18 May 1942. Following the Torch landings, he began conversion on to the P 40E, but on 26 May 1943 he was killed out of action in training flight and his body was captured in the subsequent violent forced landing, his skull being fractured when it struck the instrument panel.

René Roger

René Roger supplies the confusion attending the victory claims of pilots over France in 1939-40, for the official list of aces gives him five kills, with his unit history only four. He is included here to illustrate how the divisions in France affected individuals after the June 1940 collapse.

By the time war broke out in 1939, René Roger was one of the most experienced pilots in the Armée de l'Air. Born in Arches on 4 March 1907, he was called up for his obligatory military service in 1927. Qualifying as a pilot in 1930, he became a career NCO in the Aéronautique Militaire in May 1931. From April 1935 until September 1939, Adj Roger was an instructor at Bourget. There he flew all types of aircraft, both by day and by night.

When war was declared he was posted to GC I/235, then equipped with the MS 406. For three months he occupied his time flying reconnaissance missions over Germany by day and fighter missions by night. The Battle of France gave him the opportunity to try out his fighter, and on 15 May 1940 he downed two Bf 109s in three minutes near Rosendals. Six days later he destroyed another, followed by an He 111 the following day. At this point the SEAA gave him another kill to make him an ace.

In August 1940 he was posted to GC I/199 in North Africa, and on 14 June 1941 the D 520s of the unit were transferred to Vichy-controlled Syria to assist the Allied invasion there. Adj Col Roger left with them, but did not participate in the campaign, for his aircraft force landed in Turkey on the 15th. Whether this was genuine, or a planned evasion as a result of his Goliath sympathies, is not known. The effect was that he spent the next six months as an escapee to the Vichy air attaché in Ankara. His attempts to obtain a commission during this time were rejected on three occasions on account of his political views, leading to him being interned for ten months between July 1942 and May 1943.
Relieved, he joined the Free French air force in the Middle East and was commissioned as a *Capt* in February 1944, following which he flew many missions over Syria and Lebanon between May–June 1945. Roger left the force in September with over 3000 flying hours to his credit.

### Roger Sauvage

Drawing on his French racecar career and a military career, Roger Sauvage was born on 26 March 1917, the son of a native of Martinique, killed in action in World War I. Fascinated by aviation after reading the biography of Georges Guynemer, he joined the *Arme de l'Air* in 1935. Though most of 1937 he took part in photo-recon missions along the German border, and in April 1939 transferred to GC 1/6, based at Reims.

Throughout the winter of 1939-40 he flew many sorties, supporting observation aircraft, without ever actually being present with the chance of a target. When his baptism of fire finally came it almost cost him his life. While flying a twin-engined Potez 651, he caught up with a formation of three RAF Hurricanes, one of which suddenly attacked, and it was only with difficulty that he extricated himself from the cockpit of his burning aircraft. As his parachute deployed, his aircraft exploded leaving Sauvage barely conscious as he reached the ground. For four days he lay on the snow and was only able to identify the British pilot who finished his aircraft's fuel running out. The Potez 651 was destroyed.

In 1943 he restored his piloting skills, with seven hours in training at Le Bourget and fifteen hours in the Potez 651. On 13 May 1944, he was posted to the 9th Wing at Reims and trained in the Potez 651 before being posted to the 1st Wing at Metz. In August 1944, he was appointed to the Air Force's flying school at Reims.

### Robert Williams

Inspired from the age of 11 by the exploits of the great French aces such as Guynemer and Fournel in World War I, Robert Williams was born on 24 February 1911 in St. Martin-le-Bois. Following an unsuccessful but successful education, he entered Saint Cyr in 1933. After receiving his pilot's wings, he was posted to SPA 10 GC/12 in September 1934. As part of the *Goumiers* group he trained under the leadership of *Capt* Pierre de Chambeaux. Williams trained in the same unit as Simon, the leader of the unit which attacked the German airbase at Sfax on 6 May 1940.

In September 1939 GC/12 was equipped with the MS 406. Based at Beaulieu, Williams found the machine of the day, which had trouble with its wheels, to be a great challenge, but he managed to land it safely, as did his colleagues. A few days later, the unit was deployed to the borders of Tunisia. Williams was appointed to the command of the unit on 22 February, and was assigned to the *First Line* on 7 March. Williams and his unit engaged a Do 17 over Sousse. Although his wingman was covered in oil, the unit was still able to carry out a successful mission. The unit was then in action in Tunisia, where Williams continued to fly, receiving a number of promotions.

### Josef Stehlik

Another of the expatriate Czechs who served foreign air forces as well, Josef Stehlik was born in Pilzno on 23 March 1915. He was part of the 3rd Air Regiment of the Czech Air Force when the Germans occupied his country, but escaped to France where he was posted to GC 1/83 (then flying MS 406) in time for the Battle of France. His first combat on 13 May was unsuccessful, but he was later credited with a probable Bl 109. He was posted to the 9th Wing at Reims in September 1939.

Stehlik, described as the best pilot of the group, was posted to the 9th Wing at Reims in September 1939. He was one of the few pilots to escape from France, but he was later credited with a probable Bl 109 and a probable Bl 109. He was posted to the 9th Wing at Reims in September 1939.

On 13 May 1940, while flying a Bl 109, Stehlik was engaged by a Bl 109, and was later credited with a probable Bl 109. He was posted to the 9th Wing at Reims in September 1939.

On 13 May 1940, while flying a Bl 109, Stehlik was engaged by a Bl 109, and was later credited with a probable Bl 109. He was posted to the 9th Wing at Reims in September 1939.

His flight on 22 February, a brush with the FA Flak on 7 March, Williams and his unit engaged a Do 17 near Sousse. Although his wingman was covered in oil, the unit was still able to carry out a successful mission. The unit was then in action in Tunisia, where Williams continued to fly, receiving a number of promotions.
Appendix 1

The following is the official list of French aces, as compiled by the Société Historique de l’Armée de l’Air:

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Appendix 2

Aircraft and Equipment

During 1939-40 the main equipment of the French single-seat fighter groupes was a mixed one, the Bl 152. In 1939, the Morane Saulnier MS 406 was delivered, followed by the American-built Curtiss Hawk 75. In 1940, the Bl 155 made its front-line debut in June.

Of the four main types in the front-line squadrons, the MS 406 was the only one to be used in the R.A.F.'s Hurricane, with its fabric-covered tubular metal fuselage and fabric wings. The most effective fighter during the Battle of France was the Hawk. Although only lightly armed and relatively slow, its superior maneuverability enabled it to hold its own against the Bf 109. It is worth mentioning that many of the Hawks were painted in the wrong colors, with more than one color scheme. However, the performance of these three types was such that the pilots found it too often that they could barely catch the German bombers, let alone catch or destroy them.

Mountains had cannon, but these were relatively slow-firing, while the early Hawks had only four machine guns. The D-520 had only one cannon, but also four machine guns— and the performance to be able to use them to advantage. Compared to the average R.A.F. or U.S. fighter's flight path of 400, the first thing that is apparent when looking at a French pilot's war record is how much equipment appeared to be superior. Apart from a bulky flying suit, the rigid leather flying helmet (known as a 'bombe') wooden torque and oxygen regulator all served to restrict movement within the cockpit, especially the pilot's view over the shoulder.

As an aside, the Thule Mark III and IV French aircraft worked in the opposite sense to those of most other nations in that pulling back on the throttle lever gave more power. This led to numerous accidents during transition training onto later Allied types.

Appendix 3

Organisation and Tactics

During summer 1939, all French fighter units were organised into Escadrilles, each made up of two Groups. Each Group had between 3 and 7 aircraft—approximately the same size as an R.A.F. squadron of the period. After the outbreak of war, the main operational unit became the Gruppe, which offered more tactical flexibility.

Units were identified by abbreviations such as GC 1/4. This indicated 'Groupe Chasse' (fighter) No. 1/4. It is important to remember that Escadrilles within an Escadrille were numbered progressively but were not identified. Thus GC 1/1 had the 1st and 2nd Escadrilles; GC 1/2 had the 3rd and 4th; and GC 1/2 had the 5th and 6th. It was a common practice for the Escadrilles to be known by the World War I units from which they were descended. For example, the 1st Escadrille of GC 1/1 was known as Spu 5, and carried the same 'spade' emblem at the vise Governor in World War I. In the desperate days of May-June 1940, it was often the case that Escadrille units remained with little or no support, being stuck in the difficult forward positions, being numbered by the French chasseur fighters. These were being called Escadrilles de Chasse de l'Aile, and usually had some five or six aircraft. A third category of fighter unit was the ECN (Escadrille de Chasse de Nuit, night fighters).

Fighter pilots were given a fairly rigid set of tactical tasks: protection of aircraft in the battle area, protection of ground objectives, and destruction of enemy 'espionnes' (i.e., reconnaissance). Co-operation with the heavy forces was a problem, as the R.A.F. preferred to use the heavy forces. One of the decisive advantages enjoyed by the R.A.F. was the combination of aircraft and pilots which was not so successful in 1940.

The air battle of the R.A.F.'s main combat unit was the Escadrille, with nine aircraft, known as a 'pattirelle simple'; formations were made of three of these fighter-type fighters, with nine aircraft, known as a 'pattirelle triple'. The German had long since found that the pair of aircraft gave the best advantage, and the R.A.F. had been able to adopt the concept. The French, however, were not so successful and the aircraft from 1940, when they started to use the triple formation, and were used by the R.A.F. for the war.
French Aces of World War 2

Barry Ketley
This 13-page colour section profiles many of the aircraft flown by the leading French aces of World War 2, as well as the mounts of some of the lesser known pilots who scored five or more kills. All the artwork has been specially commissioned for this volume, and profile/unit insignia artist Mark Rolfe and figure artist Mike Chappell have gone to great pains to illustrate the aircraft, and their pilots, as accurately as possible following exhaustive research by the author. The majority of the 39 aircraft depicted in profile over the following pages have never been illustrated in colour before. Indeed, this volume features the largest number of colour profiles pertaining to the aircraft flown by French aces published to date.

1  
Hawk 75A-2 '1', s/n 151, flown by Cne Jean Accart, GC I/5, Suippes, early 1940

2  
Hawk 75A-3 '2', s/n 217, flown by Edmond Marin La Meslée, GC I/5, Battle of France

3  
Hawk 75A-1 '9', s/n 99, flown by Sgt Georges Lemare, GC I/4, France, spring 1940
4 Hawk 75A-3 'yellow 67', s/n 267, flown by Camille Plubeau, GC I/5, Morocco (probably Rabat), 1941

5 Hawk 75A-3 '9', s/n 295, flown by Sgt Georges Lemare, 1ere Escadrille of GC I/4, Dakar-Oukam, September 1941

6 MS.406C-1 '6', s/n 163 (matricule militaire N-483), flown by Adj Pierre Le Gloan, 5eme Escadrille of GC III/6, Chartres, May 1939

7 MS.406C-1 '27', s/n 772 (matricule militaire L-801), flown by Adj Klebert Doublet, 2eme Escadrille of GC II/1, Piessis-Belleville, May 1940
MS 406C-1 '111', s/n 948 (matricule militaire L-979), flown by Sous Lt Wladyslaw Gnys, 1ère Escadrille of GC III/1, Norrent-Fontes, 10 May 1940

MS 406C-1 '2', s/n 846 (matricule militaire L-875), flown by Adj Edgar Gaignaire, 1ère Escadrille of GC III/1, Rozay-en-Brie, 8 June 1940

MS 406C-1, s/n 819 (matricule militaire L-848), flown by Jean Tulasne, 2ème Escadrille of GC I/7, Rayak, Syria, December 1940

MS 406C-1, s/n 819, flown by James Denis, FAFL GC I 'Alsace', Rayak, Syria, October 1941
12
MS.406C-1, s/n 307 (matricule militaire N-8191), flown by Cne Pierre Pouyade, Escadrille 2/595, Tong, French Indo-China (Vietnam), 1942

13
Bloch 152C-1 '71', s/n 640, flown by Cne Louis Delfino, 4eme Escadrille of GC II/9, June 1940

14
Bloch 152C-1, s/n 231 (matricule militaire Y-718), flown by Cdt Marius Ambrogi, GC I/8, France, mid-1940

15
Bloch 152C-1, s/n 153, flown by Robert Thollon, GC I/8, France, mid-1940
16
D.520 '2', s/n 90, flown by Sgt Michel Madon, GC I/3, Oran, North Africa, 1941

17
D.520 '6', s/n 277, flown by Pierre Le Gloan, GC III/6, France, June 1940

18
D.520 '6', s/n 266, flown by Sous Lt René Pomier Leyrargues, GC II/7, France, 5 June 1940

19
D.520 '6', s/n 277, flown by Pierre Le Gloan, GC III/6, Syria, 1941
20
D520 '6', s/n 300, flown by Pierre Le Gloan, 5ème Escadrille of GC III/6, Algeria, spring 1942

21
D520 'G-G', s/n 347, flown by Gabriel Gauthier, GC II/7, Tunisia, 1942

22
D520 'V', s/n 136, flown by Sous Lt Georges Valentin, 3ème Escadrille of GC II/7, Sidi Ahmed, Tunisia, spring 1942

23
D520 'G-G', s/n 397, flown by Albert Littolf, FAFL GC III 'Normandie', Rayak, October 1942
24
D.520 'G-G', s/n 347, flown by Gabriel Gauthier, GC II/7, Tunisia, summer 1941

25
Potez G31 No 164 (metrice militaire X-933), flown by Pierre Pouyade, ECN IV/13, France, summer 1940

26
Spitfire Mk VB BM324, flown by Cdt Bernard Duperier, GC IV/2 'Ile de France'/No 340 Sqn, Hornchurch, 19 August 1942

27
F-5A Lightning (serial unknown), flown by Antoine de Saint Exupery, 1st Escadrille of GR II/33, Bastia, Corsica, Spring 1944
28
Tempest Mk V NV994, flown by Flt Lt P H Clostermann, No 3 Sqn, Hopsten (B.112), April 1945

29
Hurricane Mk I (Trop) Z4797, flown by Jean Tulasne and probably Albert Littolf, FAFL GC I 'Alsace', Fuka, Western Desert, May 1942

30
Hurricane Mk II (Trop) 'S' (serial unknown), flown by Lt Camille Plabeau, possibly from the fighter school at Meknes, Morocco, 1944

31
Yak-1 '44', flown by Marcel Albert, GC III 'Normandie', Ivanovo, Russia, April 1943
32
Yak-1 '11', flown by Albert Durand, GC III 'Normandie', Orel, Russia, May 1943

33
Yak-9 '14', flown by Marcel Lefevre, GC III 'Normandie', Sloboda, Russia, October 1943

34
Yak-9 '60', flown by René Challe, GC III 'Normandie', Dubrovka, Russia, June 1944

35
Yak-9 '5', flown by Roger Sauvage, GC III 'Normandie', Toula, Russia, May 1944
36
Yak-9 'Yellow 35', flown by Jacques André, GC III 'Normandie', Toula, Russia, winter 1943-44

37
Yak-3 '1', flown by René Challe, 1ère Escadrille 'Rouen' of GC III 'Normandie-Niemen', East Prussia, December 1944-17 January 1945

38
Yak-3 '6', flown by Marcel Albert, GC III 'Normandie-Niemen', East Prussia, late 1944

39
FK.58 '11', S/N 11, in service with Ecole de Chasse at either Lyon-Bron or Montpellier just after the June 1940 Armistice
1. Sous Lt Edmond Marin La Meslée of GC I/5, seen in late 1939 in France.

2. Sous Lt Pierre Le Gloan of GC III/6, Athens-Eleusis in May 1941, en route to Syria.

3. Commandant Pierre Pouyade, third CO of GC III (the Normandie-Niemen Regiment) in Russia in 1943-44.
4 Czech ace Capitaine Alois Vasatko, who served with GC I/5 in France in May 1940

5 Sous Lt Georges Pissotte of GC III/2 in northern France in the winter of 1939-40

6 Commandant Bernard Duperier of GC IV/2 'Île de France'/No 340 Sqn at Hornchurch in mid-1942
1. Egyptian vulture emblem of SPA 153.
2. SPA 67
3. SPA 155 (the 'Petit Poucet')
4. SPA 78
5. SPA 73 (the 'Cicognes')
6. GC III/6, 5th Escadrille
7. SPA 88
8. SPA 82
9. SPA 84
10. SPA 93
11. Escadrille 2/595
12. C46
13. 'Cross of Lorraine' of the Forces Françaises Libres
14. Personal emblem of Cdt Bernard Duperier
15. Unidentified, but presumably that of the fighter school at Meknes, Morocco
16. GC II/9, 4e Escadrille
17. Personal emblem of Marcel Lefèvre
18. GC III/7, 6e Escadrille
36
Yak-9 'Yellow 35', flown by Jacques Andre, GC III 'Normandie', Toula, Russia, winter 1943-44

37
Yak-3 '1', flown by Rene Challe, 1ere Escadrille 'Rouen' of GC III 'Normandie-Niemen', East Prussia, December 1944-17 January 1945

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