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Steven O Connor

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## Fighting a coalition war: the experience of the Free French soldier in the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army\*

**Steven O'Connor**  
Sorbonne University

IN JUNE 1940, AFTER GERMANY had defeated the French and British armies, France led by Marshal Philippe Pétain negotiated an armistice with Adolf Hitler. Pétain accepted German occupation of the north and west of France and moved his government to the town of Vichy. From London General Charles de Gaulle, a French army officer, called on French people to continue the war. Several thousand went to Britain to join his external resistance movement, the Free French forces. Two years later the Free French joined the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army in the Libyan desert. After victories during 1940 and 1941 in Italian South-East Libya and East Africa, on the one hand, and in Vichy's Gabon and Levant, on the other hand, the Free French were finally confronting their main adversary, Germany. They found themselves serving in a British-led coalition composed of Britons, Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans, Indians, Poles, Czechoslovakians, Yugoslavians and Greeks. This chapter tries to assess how well integrated the Free French were in this multinational force. At times the Free French commitment to the resistance was tested by the frustrations of participating in a coalition. Thus, this particular experience of military people in resistance is examined under several themes: the difficulties created by the exclusion of the Free French from Allied decision-making, French perceptions of the British and vice versa and the ways in which the Free French units maintained their own distinctive characteristics despite their dependence on the British for equipment and training.

The historiography of the Free French forces is relatively undeveloped: historians of France during the Second World War have focused

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much more attention on the Vichy regime and the resistance *within* France than on the external resistance represented by the Free French. The few historians working on the Free French have tended to concentrate on the politics surrounding de Gaulle or the personal experiences of Free French soldiers<sup>1</sup>. Recent work has also explored the movement's international networks and colonies<sup>2</sup>. There has been fewer studies of the participation of Free French forces in Allied campaigns before the movement's merger with the formerly Vichy forces of French North Africa in 1943. The existing works on this subject have concentrated on battle narrative and are restricted to a purely French perspective since they have not examined military archives outside of France<sup>3</sup>. In contrast, recent histories of the French expeditionary corps in Italy and the French 1<sup>st</sup> Army's advance into France and Germany have integrated the French into post-1942 Allied campaigns.<sup>4</sup> The historiography of the British war effort is not much better. Until recently there was little interest in the contribution of non-British forces. While historians have begun to grapple with the question of Britain's reliance on its empire<sup>5</sup>, there have been few studies of the contribution of European exile forces<sup>6</sup>. This

1 See for example, Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, *La France Libre : De l'Appel du 18 juin à la Libération*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996; Jean-François Muracciole, *Les Français Libres : L'Autre Résistance*, Paris, Tallandier, 2009; Guillaume Piketty (dir.), *Français en Résistance : Carnets de guerre, correspondances, journaux personnels*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2009.

2 See the special issue entitled "Beyond de Gaulle and beyond London: The French External Resistance and its international networks" in *Revue européenne d'histoire* Vol. 25, no. 2, 2018; Géraud Létang, *Mirages d'une rébellion. Être Français libre au Tchad (1940-1943)*, PhD thesis, Sciences Po Paris, 2019.

3 See for example, Jean-Noël Vincent, *Les Forces Françaises Libres en Afrique, 1940-1943*, Vincennes, SHAT, 1983.

4 Julie Le Gac, *Vaincre sans gloire : Le corps expéditionnaire français en Italie*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2013; Claire Miot, *Sortir l'armée des ombres. Soldats de l'Empire, combattants de la Libération, armée de la Nation ? La première armée française, du débarquement en Provence à la capitulation allemande (1944-1945)*, PhD thesis, École normale supérieure de Cachan, 2016.

5 See A. Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*, London, Continuum, 2006; Iain Johnston, *The British Commonwealth and Victory in the Second World War*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2017; Tarak Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

6 Detailed studies exist of the exile air forces. See for example Alan Brown, *Airmen in Exile: The Allied Air Forces in the Second World War*, Stroud, Sutton, 2000. But there is little research on exile land forces serving in the British-led coalition. See for example, Halik Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War*, Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 2012; Paul Lenormand, *Vers l'armée du peuple. Autorité, pouvoir et culture militaire en Tchécoslovaquie de Munich à la fin du stalinisme*, PhD thesis, Sciences Po Paris, 2019.

means that the practical questions of how Free French and other allied units operated within a British-led army have been left unaddressed.

This chapter uses material from French, British, Australian and New Zealand archives to show the Free French experience of fighting a coalition war in the desert. Key sources are the weekly military censorship summaries compiled by the censors of Middle East Command. Throughout the war the British forces and other armies employed censors to ensure that personal letters from soldiers did not reveal secrets regarding deployments and weaponry that could be useful to the enemy. Yet the censors had another role, which was to provide an assessment of morale based on what soldiers wrote in their letters. Censorship summaries for 8<sup>th</sup> Army have been preserved in archives in Britain, Australia and New Zealand<sup>7</sup>. They paint a vivid picture of the life of the ordinary soldier in the desert war. The weekly summary includes separate sections for each contingent from a British dominion, colony or foreign ally. Each section gives a summary of opinion trends on various topics, backed up by extracts from letters, which the censors judge are representative of the majority. It seems that the censors understood morale to relate to the soldiers' attitudes on topics such as the competence of the high command and the progress of the war. The letter-writer's identity is kept anonymous although rank and unit are usually indicated. This source has two drawbacks. Firstly, the reader only sees extracts rather than entire letters. Secondly, the selective nature of the summaries means that the historian is captive to the judgement of individual censors regarding what content is significant and what is not. However, this chapter believes that the summaries give a very useful indication of opinion trends in the Free French contingent and in the 8<sup>th</sup> Army generally, as the summaries were not meant for public consumption but for internal use as secret assessments of the real state of morale. The summaries are supplemented by reports by Free French and British commanding officers, British liaison officers' reports and Free French diaries and memoirs. In using this combination of sources, the chapter reveals relations between the Free French and their allies at the levels of both high command and ordinary soldiers.

This particular group of military people in resistance had diverse origins, including French citizens, French colonial subjects and foreigners (notably Spanish Republicans who had joined the French Foreign Legion after their defeat in the civil war). To be precise, there were about

<sup>7</sup> See Jonathan Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

30,000 indigenous colonial soldiers in the Free French forces which accounted for half of their total manpower. For the most part, however, this chapter focuses on European members of the Free French forces. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, for many colonial soldiers, participating in the resistance was not a voluntary act which is normally the prerequisite to be considered a resister. In their African territories (French Equatorial Africa, Cameroon), the Free French continued the French colonial army's recruitment practices which included both voluntary enlistment and conscription based on a district quota system. In contrast, recruitment in Free French colonies in India and the Pacific was exclusively voluntary<sup>8</sup>. The second reason is a practical one: this study is based on primary sources yet there are few accounts from colonial soldiers. For example, it is unlikely that the chapter's main source, the censorship summaries, include the views of many colonial soldiers since they were generally non-literate (although letters from the *bataillon du Pacifique*, who served in the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade in Libya, are represented in the summaries and are included in this study)<sup>9</sup>.

Since the chapter adopts a thematic rather than chronological approach, at the outset an outline is given of the service of the Free French forces in 8<sup>th</sup> Army. During the summer of 1941 the possibility of Free French participation in the Libyan campaign grew more unlikely as political disagreements over the governing of Levant (the French mandates of Syria and Lebanon) soured relations between the British and the Gaullists. Alongside British forces, the Free French had invaded the pro-Vichy Levant in July. Owing to incompetence, General Maitland Wilson, commanding the Allied forces, had agreed an armistice with the Vichy French which transferred the Levant to British control and made no reference to the Free French. Though the British subsequently revised the armistice to recognise Free French interests, it was the start of a rift between Churchill and de Gaulle. The former wanted the Free French to quickly fulfil their promise of independence to Syria and Lebanon, to avoid provoking Arab nationalism across the British-controlled Middle East, while the latter insisted that the British recognise Free French sovereignty over the Levant and suspected Churchill of trying to take

8 J.-F. Muracciole, *op. cit.*, p. 60-64; Eric Jennings, *Free French Africa in World War II: The African Resistance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, chapter 4.

9 For a reconstruction of Britain's and France's African soldiers' experiences through their own words, see David Killingray, 'If I fight for them, maybe then I can go back to the village': African soldiers in the Mediterranean and European campaigns, 1939-45' in P. Addison and A. Calder (eds), *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West, 1939-1945*, London, Pimlico, 1997, p. 93-114.

advantage of French weakness in order to seize the territory. The Levant invasion had been a particularly bitter experience for the Free French troops since it forced them to fight fellow Frenchmen in the Vichy forces – something which de Gaulle and Churchill had previously pledged not to do. For some it was a hard test of their commitment to the resistance. Eventually, relations improved and after lengthy negotiations, the Free French 1<sup>st</sup> Light Division joined 8<sup>th</sup> Army in January 1942. The British did not accept the title ‘Division’ because of the small number of troops, instead calling it the 1<sup>st</sup> Free French Brigade. During the battle of Gazala (26 May – 15 June 1942), the Brigade became the centre of media attention for its 15-day defence of Bir Hakeim against repeated Italo-German assaults. On the night of 10 June, the Brigade was evacuated from its encircled position. During the summer it was completely re-equipped by the British and in its next engagement, the second battle of El Alamein (23 October – 11 November 1942), it failed to hold the ridge of Himeimat under difficult conditions. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Free French Brigade joined 8<sup>th</sup> Army in April 1942. The unit lacked equipment but perhaps its worst handicap in British eyes was that it was mostly composed of colonial troops from Equatorial Africa. Both the British and the Free French shared prejudices and racist stereotypes about troops from sub-Saharan Africa: for example, that they had low intelligence which made it difficult to train them for technical roles, that they were best suited to the infantry because their physical strength and impatience meant they were excellent for attacking though unreliable in defence.<sup>10</sup> Such stereotypes were influenced by the notion of “martial races” and “*racess guerrières*”. In recruiting from their empires, both the British and French believed that some groups made better soldiers than others. In West Africa the French sought recruits from the Ouolof, Bambara and Mossi tribes of Mali but avoided the Maures of Mauritania, while in India the British preferred northerners to southerners<sup>11</sup>. Despite this poor opinion of Equatorial African troops, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade was attached to 50<sup>th</sup> British Division and fought at El Alamein. Both Brigades were withdrawn from 8<sup>th</sup> Army in late 1942 to form “Force Larminat” which later became the

10 Service Historique de la Défense, archives de la guerre (SHD-GR), 1 KT 199, Journal of General Hucher, p. 23; National Archives of the United Kingdom (NA), War Office (WO) 202/29, Colonel Knox to Major Bucknall, 18 February 1942.

11 J.-F. Muracciole, *op. cit.*, p. 63; T. Barkawi, *op. cit.*, p. 21. See also Richard Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.



1<sup>st</sup> Free French Division. In May 1943, the force joined 8<sup>th</sup> Army in Tunisia for the final stage of the North African campaign.

### ■ Coalition war: from major power to minor ally

In the French campaign of 1940, from 12 May onwards the relatively small British Expeditionary Force came under the command of General Gaston Billotte, commanding the French 1<sup>st</sup> Army Group. Two years later in Libya the situation was reversed. A small French force – the 1<sup>st</sup> Free French Brigade – came under the command of General Neil Ritchie, commander of the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army. However, unlike in 1940 when the British government had a say in the strategic direction of the Allied armies through the Franco-British Supreme War Council, in early 1942 there was no inter-allied command structure in the North African theatre and therefore the Free French leadership had little influence on plans involving its own forces<sup>12</sup>. From the British perspective this arrangement was justified by the fact that after the Franco-German armistice in June 1940, Britain was the only major military power still resisting the Axis. The comparative weakness of the military forces of the European governments exiled in London, resulted in their recognition of the British high command as 'the Allied high command'<sup>13</sup>. Yet, from the Free French perspective this subordinate position was frustrating mainly because until the French defeat of June 1940, France was considered a major military power and de Gaulle proclaimed it his mission to restore this status and to protect French national interests – goals he simply could not achieve without Britain's cooperation.

The exclusion of the Free French from decision-making within the Allied (i.e. British) high command was to cause damaging consequences for the morale and discipline of its forces. By late 1941 most Free French troops were stationed in the recently captured Vichy Levant, which was far from the fighting in Libya. In January 1942 Lieutenant-Colonel Delange, commanding the 3<sup>rd</sup> Colonial Brigade in Beirut, complained to his superiors that his troops were becoming demoralised by inaction and were seeking consolation in alcohol and women<sup>14</sup>. Discipline was suffering: arms were being stolen and there were repeated illegal absences by soldiers. Captain Langlois, commanding the 11<sup>th</sup> *bataillon*

12 See William Philpott, 'The Benefit of Experience? The Supreme War Council and the Higher Management of Coalition War, 1939–40' in M. Alexander and W. Philpott (eds), *Anglo-French Defence Relations between the Wars*, Basingstoke, Palgrave 2002, p. 209–226.

13 NA, WO 193/32, War Office to Commander-in-Chief, Home Forces, 23 June 1941.

14 SHD-GR 11 P 251, Lieutenant-Colonel Delange to General Catroux, 10 January 1942.

*de marche* (BM), warned Delange that his unit would probably disintegrate in a month if it was not deployed to the front in Libya<sup>15</sup>. However, the Free French command was powerless to accede to this request: the Libyan campaign was the remit of the British Middle East Command, who were reluctant to accept any unit that they considered ill-equipped for desert warfare. The 11<sup>th</sup> BM went to the front only after the British found equipment for it three months later. De Gaulle and his generals were frustrated to be treated as a minor ally with no say in important strategic or even operational decisions. The price was high to be part of the British-led coalition: Captain Paul Hucher, responsible for the organisation of Free French units serving with the British forces, even concluded that unnamed British politicians regarded France as a rival and wanted to limit the supply of material to the Free French in order to keep them weak and easy to control<sup>16</sup>. Morale crises became fairly common as units spent long periods away from the fighting, waiting to be equipped by the British. The Free French did not lack infantry battalions but they did lack artillery, anti-aircraft guns and most importantly, the large number of all-terrain vehicles needed to give these units mobility in the desert. Unfortunately, the British army could not even meet its own needs for equipment, which meant the Free French were very far down the list of priorities. For example, in October 1942 the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Car Squadron complained to his superior that his unit had waited six months to receive their vehicles and even then the British had assigned them to guard duties in Egypt rather than deploying them to 8<sup>th</sup> Army. The commander warned that his troops were extremely impatient: they had not been in combat since July 1941 and he expected that men would start deserting. The British were concerned enough about the danger of this unit's commitment to the resistance weakening that they ordered it to the front five days later<sup>17</sup>.

Owing to the difficulty in obtaining British equipment, when the 1<sup>st</sup> Free French Brigade joined 8<sup>th</sup> Army in early 1942, its transport was a mix of British and French vehicles (acquired from Vichy stores in the Levant). From April 1942 onwards the equipment situation improved with the French receiving 110 trucks, allowing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade to deploy to Libya<sup>18</sup>. Significantly, Hucher asserts that it became easier to obtain equipment from the British after the battle of Bir Hakeim. According to

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> SHD-GR 1 KT 199, Hucher, journal entry of 21 August 1942.

<sup>17</sup> NA, WO 202/64, Report by Lieutenant Troquereau, 30 October 1942.

<sup>18</sup> SHD-GR 1 KT 199, Journal of General Hucher, p. 29.



him, 8<sup>th</sup> Army began to regard the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade among its best units after its stubborn defence of this strategic position<sup>19</sup>. This brings us to the question of British and Free French perceptions of the other.

### ■ Perceiving the other: the British and Free French in 8<sup>th</sup> Army

Before discussing perceptions, it is necessary to consider the practical question of how the two forces overcame the language barrier. In the military world as in diplomacy, French was still an important *lingua franca*: at the start of the war, the British army had more officers qualified as interpreters in French than any other language (273 or 42% of all interpreters)<sup>20</sup>. Yet since neither country was distinguished for the learning of foreign languages, it is unsurprising to note that most soldiers and even officers on both sides seem to have had limited knowledge of the other's language<sup>21</sup>. Interpreters were required to ensure smooth liaison. This work was mostly done by British liaison officers from the Spears Mission<sup>22</sup>. The Free French had a Corps of Interpreters but it was short of personnel.

Turning to the question of perceptions, the weekly censorship summaries of British and French soldiers' personal letters corroborate Hucher's impression that 8<sup>th</sup> Army regarded the Free French in a different light after Bir Hakeim. In early 1942 the Free French rarely figured in letters written by British soldiers – unsurprising given the small Free French presence in 8<sup>th</sup> Army. When they were mentioned, it was usually in connection with many British soldiers' resentment that thousands of foreign soldiers were based in Britain while British troops were enduring long periods of active service in North Africa. A member of the Royal Warwickshire Yeomanry wrote: "I am quite convinced nobody would notice us if only they would let us return. What with the Free French, Free Canadians, Free Hungarians, Indians, Poles, Czechs and Dutch,

19 SHD, GR 1 KT 199, 'Mémoires du général Hucher', p. 39.

20 *The Monthly Army List: October 1939*, London, His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1939, p. 3551-3575.

21 On Britain's shortcomings regarding the learning of foreign languages, see Hilary Footitt and Simona Tobia, *WarTalk: Foreign Languages and the British War Effort in Europe, 1940-47*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2013, p. 12-27. See also Franziska Heimbürger, 'Fighting Together: Language Issues in the Military Coordination of First World War Allied Coalition Warfare' in H. Footitt and M. Kelly (eds), *Languages and the Military: Alliances, Occupation and Peace Building*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2012, p. 47-57.

22 For more about the Spears Mission, see Steven O'Connor, 'The Free French and British Forces in the Desert War, 1942: The Learning Curve in Interallied Military Cooperation', *Revue européenne d'histoire*, vol. 27, no.1-2, p. 176-198.

surely a spot could be found for us... the Free Warwicks!<sup>23</sup> There was a noticeable difference in British views by the summer of 1942. In the aftermath of Bir Hakeim, letter-writers described the Free French as "magnificent", "fearless" and "tough"<sup>24</sup>. A British driver wounded in the engagement declared: "Their defence of Bir Hakeim will go down in history as one of the finest actions fought out here"<sup>25</sup>.

Attitudes among senior British officers towards the Free French underwent a similar transformation. After the rapid collapse of France in June 1940, many senior British officers lost their confidence in the French army – an army which they had viewed as far superior to their own at the war's outbreak<sup>26</sup>. When Churchill ordered the British army to try to recruit French soldiers interned in Britain after the Franco-German armistice, General John Dill asserted that the French should be told that "any man who wants to stay and fight here can do; and then I hope they will all go back"<sup>27</sup>. Indeed, Lieutenant-Colonel R. Knox, the chief British liaison officer to the Free French in Cairo, complained of Francophobia among British generals. After Bir Hakeim, Knox reported that the Free French were the subject of universal praise within 8<sup>th</sup> Army. A senior officer in 30 Corps wrote: "The Free French with us have done wonderfully well, we think them grand, and everybody should know it."<sup>28</sup> The reputation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Free French Brigade received a temporary blow when they failed, under very challenging conditions, to hold Himeimat ridge at the start of the battle of El Alamein. General Bernard Montgomery raged: "the French troops... do not understand how to train for battle and how to employ a special technique to fit a special problem. They are in fact quite useless, except to guard aerodromes"<sup>29</sup>. Yet his harsh generalisation cannot be taken very seriously as six months later he was delighted with the performance of General Leclerc's force at the battle of Ksar Rhilane<sup>30</sup>.

23 Australian War Memorial (AWM), 54 883/2/97, Censorship Summary (CS) no. 11 (21-27 January 1942), p. 4.

24 See for example AWM, 54 883/2/97, CS 30 (3-9 June 1942), 2 and CS 32 (17-23 June 1942), p. 4.

25 Archives New Zealand (ANZ), R20111109, CS 35 (8-14 July 1942), p. 27.

26 Martin Alexander, 'Dunkirk in military operations, myths and memories' in R. Tombs and E. Chabal (eds), *Britain and France in Two World Wars*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 95.

27 P.M.H. Bell, *A Certain Eventuality: Britain and the Fall of France*, London, Saxon House 1974, p. 197.

28 AWM, 54 883/2/97, CS 30 (3-9 June 1942), p. 2.

29 Quoted in Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield, 1942-1944*, London, Hamish, 1983, p. 163.

30 NA, WO 202/104, Knox to Archdale, 10 April 1943.

Turning to Free French perceptions of the British, Franco-British relations had been plunged into turmoil after the British army withdrew from France during the German invasion in May 1940, followed by the British attack on the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir in Algeria on 3 July which was motivated by Churchill's fear that Pétain would hand over the ships to Germany, as part of the armistice. However, it is unclear to what extent these events impacted Free French perceptions of the British. In the Middle East censorship summaries (1941 onwards) of French letters, Gaullists often criticised Vichy and were consistently positive about the British, except for a few occasions, notably the bombing of a Renault factory in Paris by the Royal Air Force. Thus, at Bir Hakeim several French soldiers praised the support they received from the RAF. An officer in the 2<sup>nd</sup> BM echoed this confidence in the British: "We are witnessing the splendid strategical operations of our English Allies. Their High Command really has the genius and what wealth of material of all kinds<sup>31</sup>". However, by mid-June 8<sup>th</sup> Army was in full retreat, inspiring panic in Cairo known as "The Flap". Censorship summaries indicate a feeling throughout 8<sup>th</sup> Army that their leadership was not a match for the commander of the *Afrika Korps*, General Erwin Rommel. Free French soldiers joined British troops in criticising the British command and their penchant for "strategic withdrawals<sup>32</sup>". But French anger was also directed at British troops: "If each unit had stood its ground out there the way we did, the enemy would not be so near to Alexandria. I think the apprentice-fighters are going to redeem themselves at last. It is hard to see our efforts and sacrifices wasted<sup>33</sup>". Confidence in the British began to be restored by August owing to the fact that 8<sup>th</sup> Army had halted the German advance and the French were starting to receive new equipment.

Senior Free French officers admired the 8<sup>th</sup> Army's ability to wage modern war in the desert but, as Knox reported, "they look upon our system of command and organisation as being overburdened with paper and red-tape<sup>34</sup>". For example, in December 1941 General Pierre Kœnig, commanding the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, spent two weeks negotiating with British staff officers the conditions under which 8<sup>th</sup> Army would accept a Free French force. In his view the British fixated too much on numbers. He described "torturous" discussions on the changes required to the organisation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Light Division so that it would resemble the British

31 AWM, 54 883/2/97, CS 31 (10-16 June 1942), p. 15.

32 ANZ, R20111109, CS 34 (1-7 July 1942), p. 21.

33 ANZ, R20111109, CS 35 (8-14 July 1942), p. 27.

34 NA, WO 202/104, Knox to Archdale, 3 August 1942.

equivalent – an independent brigade group<sup>35</sup>. Similarly, after the French joined 8<sup>th</sup> Army, General Edgar de Larminat, the commander of French Forces in the Western Desert, became frustrated with the slowness of the British chain of command. When the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade needed to request material and men from its depots in the Levant it was expected to send this request through several layers of command – divisional, corps and army headquarters. Unsurprisingly this process was extremely slow and to the irritation of the British command, de Larminat often tried to bypass it by radio contact with the Levant or the use of couriers<sup>36</sup>. His willingness to break the rules reflects the contradiction of the Free French: they were members of a regular military force based on hierarchy and discipline yet they were also mavericks, especially the officers. By joining de Gaulle, they had disobeyed Vichy's orders and deserted the French army. They risked losing French nationality or being court martialed and sentenced to death if captured by Vichy. Therefore, the fact that they became resistance fighters shows their rebellious streak. As we shall see, this independent spirit made the Free French resourceful, quick to find solutions to problems and contemptuous of British regulations.

### ■ **“L'esprit Free French”: preserving idiosyncrasies in a foreign army**

The British high command tried to impose its doctrine on the Free French through the initial training given to the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade and through the British liaison team attached to it. This created considerable conflict between the allies, as the Gaullists perceived their mission as restoring French military honour and maintaining the traditions of the French army. In late 1941, General de Larminat had convened two meetings of all senior Free French officers in the Levant to decide the future organisation and armaments of their units, based on the study of the lessons of the French defeat of 1940. These discussions produced a distinctively French solution to the challenges of modern warfare. A consensus was reached that the Free French forces needed mobility and powerful anti-tank and anti-aircraft defences. The result was the 1<sup>st</sup> Light Division which had far more firepower than the British equivalent or a French infantry division of 1940. A key decision was the adoption of the 75mm cannon as an anti-tank gun for the infantry. Previously, the French had used the 25mm cannon but this had proved ineffective against German armour whereas the 75 could penetrate any tank then in existence. The French

35 M.P. Koenig, *Bir-Hakeim : 10 juin 1942*, Paris, Robert Laffont 1971, p. 110-111.

36 SHD-GR 1 KT 199, Journal of General Hucher, p. 8.

decision to use their 75s instead of the standard British anti-tank gun, the 2-pounder (40mm), was vindicated at the battle of Gazala. Two British brigades were rapidly overrun by German *panzers* and Middle East Command conceded that the 2-pounder was obsolete<sup>37</sup>. In contrast, the Free French armed with 75s held Bir Hakeim for 15 days. After the battle Koenig reported that the Brigade had destroyed 52 tanks and 11 armoured cars<sup>38</sup>.

The most distinctive characteristic of the Free French forces serving with 8<sup>th</sup> Army originated as a response to the delay in obtaining equipment from the British. Koenig called it "*l'esprit* Free French": the shrewd use of leftovers, inflating demands and salvaging material abandoned on the battlefield – in other words the ability to improvise<sup>39</sup>. Of these activities, it was salvaging combined with Free French ingenuity which produced the most impressive results. Thanks to its salvaging and repair operations the 101<sup>st</sup> *Compagnie du Train* gained about 15 vehicles. Near Bir Hakeim the French recovered three British 25-pounder cannons and by cannibalising them, they were able to make two working cannons<sup>40</sup>. Moreover, the French believed the effectiveness of their 75 as an anti-tank gun would be greatly enhanced if it could be made mobile. After experiments, Lieutenant Conus and Captain Bayrou succeeded in mounting a 75 on the turret ring of an Italian tank which was then mounted on a truck. This allowed the 75 to pivot and fire at almost all azimuths<sup>41</sup>. The "Conus Gun" as it became known impressed the British command who approved it for manufacture. Four of these vehicles were part of the Free French flying column that joined 8<sup>th</sup> Army in August 1942<sup>42</sup>.

## ■ Conclusion

What becomes evident from this study of the Free French experience of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army is that the British and French differed in their conception of integration. As the leader of this coalition in the desert, Britain expected Allied units to operate like British ones. For the French joining 8<sup>th</sup> Army in early 1942, integration did not mean blindly conforming to all British

37 I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, 4 vol., London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1960, iii, p. 243.

38 SHD-GR 11 P 250, General Koenig's report of operations at Bir Hakeim, 14 June 1942, appendix.

39 M.-P. Koenig, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

40 B. Saint Hillier, *op. cit.*, p. 38-39, 51.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

42 NA, WO 202/104, Knox to Archdale, 3 August 1942.



rules and methods. In fact, the Free French brigades became hybrids of two national military cultures. Their equipment and their training were a mix of French and British. They kept their own organisation and tactics, but they incorporated British ideas that they found effective. When the Free French command decided in July 1942 to form a division, they decided to follow the British model. Hucher observed that “Larminat and Kœnig had at last understood that to fight as part of a foreign army, the best thing is to adopt its organisation pure and simple, *not excluding certain adjustments where we can do better*”<sup>43</sup>.

Though the British considered the Free French a minor ally, in comparison with Britain’s other allies they certainly had a more important status. In the Middle East in mid-1942, the British-led coalition included 1,606 Czechoslovakians, 1,906 Yugoslavians, 4,720 Poles and 12,191 Greeks<sup>44</sup>. The Free French, in contrast, had 8,945 personnel serving with the British in Libya and Egypt, 23,483 troops protecting the Levant in case of a German descent from the Caucasus in southern Russia *and* their own territory in Africa, the Levant, India and the Pacific which ensured a supply of new recruits<sup>45</sup>. This gave the Gaullists some leverage with the British and explains why they were in no rush to abandon French army norms in favour of British ones: they saw themselves as an important ally fighting *together with* – and not *assimilating into* – the British army. The other allies, with less troops and no territory, had little choice but to conform to the British military system. Even when the Poles were able to form a corps of 50,000 men, thanks to Russia evacuating former prisoners-of-war (POW) to the Middle East, their total dependence on Britain constrained them to follow British organisation and doctrine<sup>46</sup>. Similarly, the Free French complained about the delay in receiving equipment from the British but the Greeks had an even lower priority, which is why they waited for over a year, before joining 8<sup>th</sup> Army in late 1942.

While the Free French cause largely benefited from the British alliance, the disadvantages of being a small part of a big coalition

43 SHD-GR 1 KT 199, “Mémoires du général Hucher”, p. 39.

44 WO 201/2196, cable, “Mideast” to “Trooper”, 5 August 1942; WO 201/1579, Captain Hatch, Report

on the Yugoslav Forces, 19 August 1942; WO 169/3981, Captain Hogg, Report on the 2 Polish Carpathian Brigade, 29 June 1942 and WO 201/2196, Major Kirkwood to Colonel Sherston, 29 June 1942. The Polish figure excludes 20,000 former POWs newly arrived in Iran from Russia.

45 WO 201/2196, ‘Strengths Free French Units, Egypt and Western Desert’, 29 June 1942; NA, WO 202/82, Report for June on liaison with Free French forces, annexure B.

46 NA, WO 201/1395, General Pownall to General Anders, 30 April 1943.



occasionally tested their commitment to the resistance. The absence of an interallied war council, such as existed in 1939-40, denied de Gaulle a role in the strategic direction of the war or even in decisions affecting his own forces. Thus, Free French troops endured long delays in being equipped and deployed to Libya, resulting in demoralisation and, for some, a questioning of their commitment. For the British, the French defence at Bir Hakeim proved their commitment to the resistance and Britain boosted its support. Conversely, the failures at Himeimat made both sides momentarily doubt the commitment of the other. Finally, as a resistance movement, the Free French tended to value independent-thinking and bold action over strict rule-following, which led to conflicts with the British army, a regular military force. Yet, Gaullist resourcefulness combined with learning from the British experience of mechanised warfare, gradually enabled the Free French to overcome the problems of operating within a foreign army, giving them an advantage over the formerly pro-Vichy and more rigid *Armée d'Afrique* after the two merged in 1943.

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