

FOCUS

MAXENCE SIMON, THE FIRST OF THE BIR HACHEM MAQUIS KILLED IN ACTION



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VILLES
& PAYS
D'ART &
D'HISTOIRE
DIRE



Cover page

On the left: portrait of Maxence Simon (date unknown).

© Source : Maxence Bouilloux private archives.

On the right : memorial stele dedicated to Maxence Simon in Saint-Mary.

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Opposite

Bri Hacheim maquis badge.

© Maison de la résistance René Michaud, Chasseneuil-sur-Bonnieure.

FROM THE TIME OF STORIES TO THE STORY OF THE PAST

This publication has the modest ambition of providing a historical account of the death of a young man belonging to the Bir Hacheim maquis¹. More than 75 years later, using scientific methodology, the author sheds a dispassionate and demystified light on this tragic event. This and other events linked to resistance movements against the occupying forces between 1940 and 1944 have been widely described in literature.

Nonetheless, the recent opening of archives relating to the Occupation period in a more peaceful time has provided fundamental information for understanding the Occupation and the Liberation of France.

The methodology underlying this work is one that any historian should obviously follow to the letter. It is based on the objective criticism of different sources of information, namely the bibliography which brings together the work already carried out on the period, the public or private archives available and the interviews conducted with direct or indirect witnesses of the events. Historical truth must inexorably emerge from the confrontation, contextualisation and hierarchisation of information drawn from sources by the historian's investigations. The proportion given to direct testimony must not, under any circumstances, supplant the others, given that memory is fallible, memories are reconstructed a posteriori according to cognitive input, the interview remains difficult to master for the neophyte and the intentions of the speaker complicated to grasp². Indeed,

the witness is only human and can make mistakes, forget, confuse and have only a fragmented view of an event. The raw material that constitutes his testimony requires special precautions before it can be used³.

By publishing his work, the historian then offers his colleagues who are specialists in the period the opportunity to enter into a phase of contradiction, revealing his methodology and citing his sources, which may lead to the affirmation, or, as the case may be, the refutation of the chronology and interpretations proposed. The same applies to the progression of knowledge in all sciences, and history as a human science is no exception. All in all, it is thanks to the methodology and the confrontation of theses that historians are intrinsically different from journalists, novelists of the past or proponents of uchronia.

A CLASH BETWEEN MAQUIS AND OCCUPYING FORCES

On 5 February 1944, late in the evening at around 10.30pm, a Citroën C4 van⁴ was driving along the road from Chasseneuil-sur-Bonnieure to Saint-Mary. Despite the curfew imposed by the passive defence measures, the van was driving with its lights on, even though it had already been dark for several hours, on a slightly uphill road. Suddenly, the driver stopped the vehicle as it approached an unannounced police check by the feldgendarmarie, a Nazi military police unit. Two German gendarmes in forward positions approached the vehicle to check it. The driver shot the first feldgendarme at point-blank



1. Article published in *Le Matin Charentais* on Thursday 10 February 1944.
 © Source : Charente County Archives, Series 1PER2/71.

2. Sketch attached to the report of the French gendarmerie who arrived on the scene on the morning of 6 February 1944.
 © Source : Charente County Archives, Series 1W50.

range, then the second a moment later. The shots alerted the rest of the detachment nearby and a gunfight broke out between the two sides.

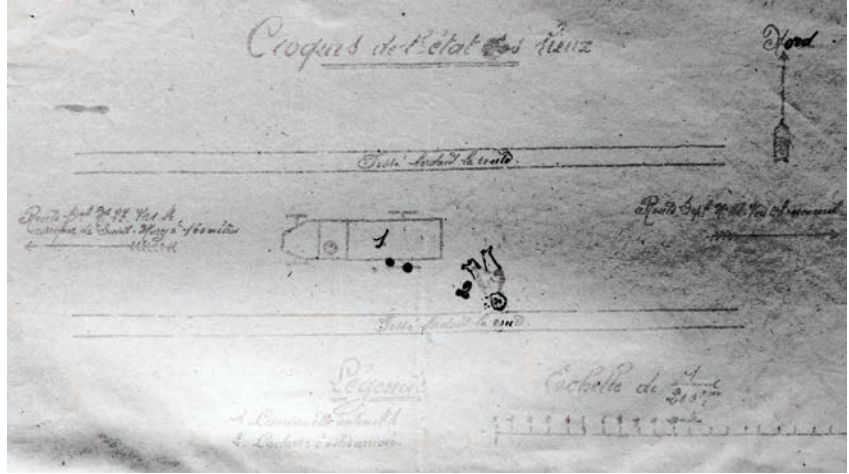
Two men in the cab of the van and nine in the back suddenly got out. The vehicle was brought to a halt by fire from German soldiers and the occupants took refuge in the ditches on either side of the road. Shots were exchanged and the passengers in the van tried to escape through the thickets obscured by the thick winter night. Two groups formed to avoid the classic Nazi encirclement tactic. The first headed north-east to take cover in the nearby forest, while the other tried to reach the Bonnieure to the south-west. In the midst of the chaos, a young man collapsed next to the van just after jumping from the rear. He lay lifeless on the road, hit by two German bullets. During their retreat, two maquisards were wounded by shrapnel from a German offensive grenade. They were still able to reach a sheltered position in the early hours of the morning after a long night's march. Although the Nazis appeared to be numerous because of the heavy fire raining down on the men in the group, the detachment only consisted of three feldgendarmes and eight men belonging to the Luftwaffe commanded by a non-commissioned officer⁵. However, the Germans were heavily-armed and seasoned soldiers, making the battle unequal. The men tried to reach a safe place, heading for the cantonment at Le Châtelars, which they reached the next morning. Some were looking for a doctor to dress wounds caused by bullets

and shrapnel from offensive grenades used to thwart their escape.

Shortly after the skirmish, Nazi soldiers attended to their wounded and collected their dead. They approached the lorry to inspect it and discovered the body of young Maxence Simon. With incredible violence, they set upon the corpse with rifle butts and boots. This fate was generally reserved by German soldiers for «terrorists» killed during operations. A few days later, on Thursday 10 February 1944, the collaborationist newspaper *Le Matin Charentais* published the following article : « During an engagement that took place between resisters and the forces of order on the outskirts of the village of Saint-Mary, in the Confolentais region, a resister was killed (IFI) (sic)».

Maxence Simon was unintendedly left behind by his companions in the theatre of operations⁶. They only noticed his absence the following morning when contact was re-established between the two groups.

Today, there is a consensus on the facts described above, despite the many more or less fanciful interpretations surrounding this unfortunate event. There are still many questions surrounding this event for those who want to understand objectively the history of the liberation of the region. Who was Maxence Simon ? What was this truck doing with eleven men on board, all lights on, at the entrance to the village of Saint-Mary ? Was this a chance encounter or had the men been denounced?



In order to answer these questions, let us retrace the events and take a closer look as the scene. On the morning of 6 February 1944, around 4 a.m., Jean Arnaud⁷, Mayor of Saint-Mary, was brought to the scene by the Angoulême Feldgendarmerie at the crossing point of the demarcation line⁸. The German soldiers made him note the presence of a corpse and asked him to identify the body. Once this was done, Jean Arnaud was taken home and contacted the Ruffec gendarmerie, as instructed by the German authorities, to have the van and body removed⁹. Gendarmes Bertin, Mondon and Moreau from the Saint-Angeau brigade quickly arrived on the scene and took the first measurements¹⁰. The three gendarmes wrote a detailed report on the clash, the accuracy of which added a new clarity to the interpretation of events. The skirmish took place near the location of the demarcation line, on Road 27 which leads from Saint-Mary to Chasseneuil, precisely 160 metres east of the crossroads with rural road no. 6¹¹ linking Cellefrouin to Les Pins. The road is straight at this point and climbs slightly to the place where the crossing of the demarcation line was located before 11 November 1942. The van was stopped in the middle of the road in the direction Chasseneuil - Saint-Mary, with both front tyres punctured as well as the left rear twin wheel. This Citroën vehicle was dark blue with drop side panels. The van bore the impacts of numerous bullets, the windows and windscreen were shattered, the fuel tank and radiator were pierced.

The gendarmes believed it to be the one stolen some time previously from Pranzac in Charente¹².

One of the gendarmes who arrived on the scene took care to draw up a sketch. He painstakingly sketched the crime scene and the position of the lorry and the body of Maxence Simon. The license plate noted by the gendarmes bore the following series of numbers and letters : 2AS.18.R.F. A white Cross of Lorraine entwined with the V for victory was painted on the radiator of the van. This plate was not a traditional administrative registration, but marked the group's membership of the Secret Army (A.S), Bir Hacheim Group 18¹³, loyal to the French Republic (F.R.). Similarly, there is no need to go over the meaning of the symbol painted on the radiator. The marks of membership of this group of illegals, as reckless as they were imprudent, ostentatiously displayed the symbols of their rebellion against the occupying forces. At the beginning of 1944, the hope of victory was on everyone's mind. The Russian campaign, which was a disaster for the Wehrmacht and the Allied landings in North Africa, which prefigured another, stimulated the determination of young people to fight the occupying forces. In this specific case, the presence at their side of the Regional Military Delegate (D.M.R.) Claude Bonnier sent from London certainly gave rise to unbridled enthusiasm. Indeed, in order to organise, coordinate and unify the internal resistance movements, the *France Libre* authorities sent



1. Combatant's Card issued to René Simon on 18 December 1945.

© Source : Maxence Bouilloux private archives.

2. Portrait of Ginette Simon (date unknown), sister of Maxence Simon.

© Source : Maxence Bouilloux private archives.

3. Marriage certificate of the parents of Maxence Simon, René Simon and Eva Pénigaud.

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a D.M.R. to each region. In Charente, Claude Bonnier, alias Hypothénus, was dropped off by plane on the banks of the Charente on the night of 14 November 1943 with Jacques Nancy¹⁴, who was to take charge of a Sabotage section¹⁵. He met many groups in the region and on the evening of 5 February 1944, he was present at Le Châtelars to give Pierre-André Chabanne's A.S 18 group the prerogatives of London. The *Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur* had to facilitate the Allied landings on D-Day and then accompany the advance of the Allied soldiers by delaying the mobilisation of Nazi troops towards the landing site as effectively as possible. Harassing enemy troops and sabotaging communication routes would require perfect coordination of all resistance movements. The message went down well with the audience at Le Châtelars¹⁶.

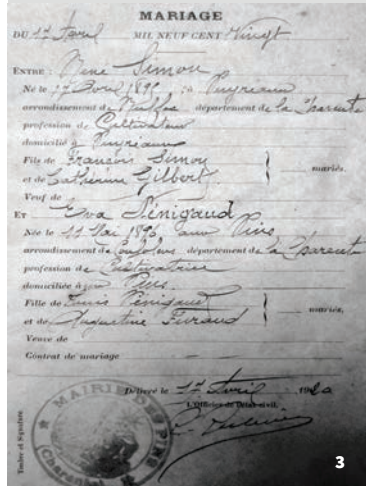
However, the majority of illegals were not trained to go underground, and patience was not the first virtue of youth. In fact, many groups were infiltrated and dismantled by the German services in the south-west of France at the end of 1943. As part of these major raids, Claude Bonnier was arrested in Bordeaux on 9 February 1944 by one of the heads of the Bordeaux Gestapo, Friedrich-Wilhelm Dohse. This arrest was catastrophic for the Resistance in the south-west of France, as Claude Bonnier's arrest meant that many confidential documents fell into the hands of the Nazis. He chose to commit suicide in his cell so as not to risk talking. The concomitance of the

two events, whose scope was quite different, clearly established the difficult context in which the resistance movements were structured by *France Libre* and the ferocity of the fight against these groups described as terrorists by the occupying forces.

SO WHO WAS MAXENCE SIMON ?

Two metres to the rear of the van parked on the carriageway, a body lay across the road. He was lying on his back with his head on the left-hand verge of the road leading to Saint-Mary. His body was pierced by two bullets, the first lodged in the shoulder, the second in the left side, while his face was barely recognizable¹⁷. With ferocity, the German soldiers set about his body as they examined the van once calm had returned. It should be noted that he was not shot in the head while driving the vehicle, as is commonly reported¹⁸.

The body was still dressed in grey plus fours, a khaki jacket and a navy blue greatcoat similar to that worn by *chasseurs à pied* (light infantry). One detail struck the gendarmes so much that they included it in their report : the body no longer had shoes on its feet. We can bet that the police were not the first to arrive on the scene, certainly preceded by a body thief whose nationality remained difficult to establish. The body was transported to the town hall to await burial under the escort of the French gendarmes who arrived on the scene in the early morning. Maxence Simon, a local boy, was born on 19 July 1921 at Les Fouillons in Les Pins. His parents René and



Eva (née Penigaud) Simon were both farmers in the commune of Les Pins. Maxence, whose first name in the civil register was Robert, had a sister Ginette, 6 years his junior, born on 7 February 1927.

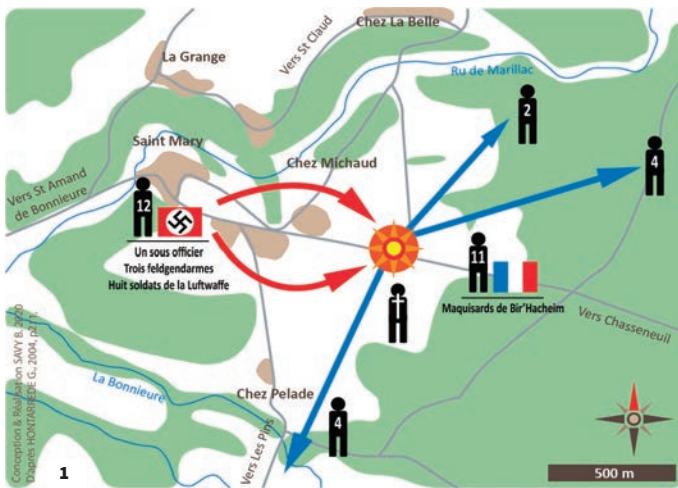
In the early thirties, the family lived off the subsidies from the 8-hectare property they farmed. Then, on 27 May 1932, Eva Simon died and her two young children, Maxence aged 11 and Ginette aged 5, were brought up by their father. René Simon was a veteran of the Great War. He was drafted in the spring of 1915 and trained as a machine gunner in Bayonne from mid-April to mid-May before being sent to the front. He remained mobilised in the infantry throughout the conflict. At the beginning of the 1940s, he still had a grudge against the Germans, whom he had fought for three long years.

The proximity of the demarcation line and his hatred of the Nazi invader made him a potential smuggler for many refugees seeking to flee to the free zone. In this wooded area, refugees fleeing the Nazis in the occupied zone tried to cross into the free zone by avoiding the checkpoints. The Israelites in particular were seeking to escape the increasingly repressive policy of the occupying forces in the northern zone. René Simon was one of those who, like others in the country, took risks in the dead of night to get people across the demarcation line, sometimes for meagre remuneration, but most of the time for nothing. Using carefully chosen back roads outside the more formal patrol routes, whole families crossed this famous line in the hope of escaping Nazi pursuit for a while at least.

But on the evening of 9 June 1942, he was arrested at his home by the German police in Angoulême, guided by a French agent. He was suspected of facilitating the clandestine crossing of the demarcation line, as stated in the information sheet drawn up by *Maréchal des Logis Chef* Langlade of the Saint-Angeau gendarmerie on 17 June 1942. After a tough interrogation by men from the Sipo S.D.¹⁹, he was imprisoned without further trial at the prison in Angoulême²⁰. He returned home shortly afterwards for lack of evidence. Other people from the Saint-Mary area were arrested in this huge operation against people smugglers, some of whom were not as lucky as René Simon and were deported to Germany.

At the end of 1943, Maxence Simon, like all men of his age, was called up to work for the German occupying forces. Indeed, this Compulsory Labour Service (S.T.O.) was established by Pierre Laval on 16 February 1943 to meet German labour requirements in the occupied countries. Under this scheme, 600,000 young people in France would be forced to work in Germany for two years. In Charente, almost 5,000 young men were affected. Around 3,700 Charentais left for Germany and the Atlantic coast, where they were busy building the Nazi fortifications of the Atlantic Wall²¹.

Like more than 1,300 people from Charente in 1943, Maxence Simon refused to submit to Vichy orders and took to the maquis. At the end of 1943, he went underground. Chabanne's group at Le Châtelars allowed him to escape from the French gendarmerie, which was hunting down



1. Sketch showing the encounter between the Bir Hacheim maquis group, the feldgendarmes and German soldiers on 6 February 1944.

© Benoît Savy, d'après HONTARREDE G., 2004, p. 211.

2. The crossing of the demarcation line at Saint-Mary, a French checkpoint in the summer of 1942.

© Source : O.N.A.C - CORDET F. 2044, p. 42.

the resisters with varying degrees of zeal. He joined up with Pierre-André Chabanne because, at the time, joining a maquis meant above all joining up with a person in whom you placed all your trust, as the spartan conditions and the use of an alias to hide ones true identity could be destabilising²². Dozens of those who refused to join the S.T.O. hid themselves so as not to leave²³. For the German authorities, they were deserters and therefore treated as such when arrested. Maxence Simon remained in the underground group until the infamous 5 February 1944, and the encounter with the Wehrmacht detachment at Saint-Mary.

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER OR ONE ORGANIZED FOLLOWING A TIP-OFF ?

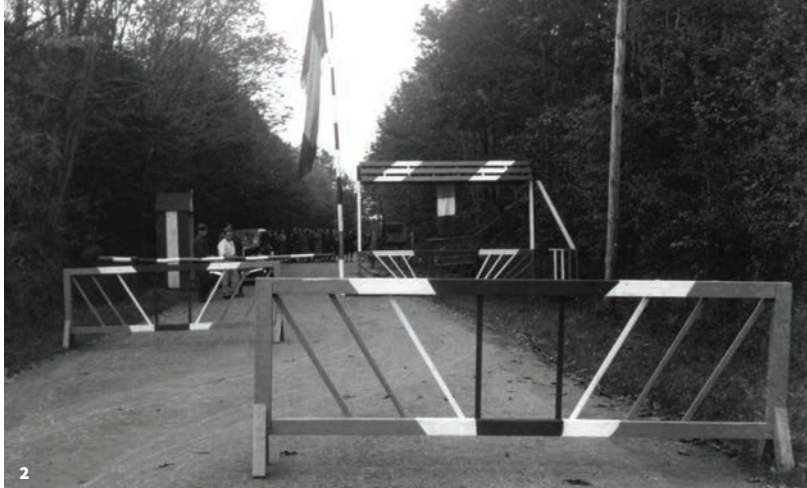
Before analysing the nature of this encounter, let's discuss its impact in literature. One of the first to write about the Bir Hacheim maquis announced in a work published in 1981 that it was almost war booty : a machine gun and an armoured car ! All this accompanied by some thirty dead and as many wounded in the ranks of the German forces²⁴. It picks up part of the mythology founded around the valiant episodes of armed resistance in Charente at the time. The description of the sequence of events is most extraordinary, and the role of each person is magnified according to the different versions, sometimes even romanticised, with no way of separating the wheat from the chaff.

for a moment on the death of the first German gendarme, shot by the driver of the van with a pistol shot for some, by a burst of Sten gunfire fired by his companion present in the cabin for others, each one better informed than the others²⁵. Given what is currently known, we cannot relate precisely the exact conditions of the shooting, direct or indirect testimony not being sufficient to place it in historical objectivity.

Similarly, for decades the human toll remained most fanciful. Finally, two works based on a large number of archives examined²⁶ provide a closer look at the formal reality of three dead and a handful of wounded Germans. This is undoubtedly the correct figure, given the reports from the occupying forces on this episode which have recently become available²⁷.

Then some have claimed that an ambush had been set up to trap the group which, inevitably, to complete the plot, had been denounced by a member of the commando or a very well-informed person²⁸. Suffice to say that the literature has, so far, not provided any proof to this effect. In the present state of historical knowledge, the thurifers of this cabal have not moved beyond the stage of the chimerical allegation.

The available documentation even seems to confirm a completely different hypothesis. The message sent by the Angoulême gendarmerie to the Charente Prefecture at 11.15 am on 6 February 1944 was as follows : « *During the*



night of 5 to 6 February 1944, an encounter occurred between the occupying forces and resisters, at the eastern exit of the town of Saint-Mary, on the road to Chasseneuil. A Citroën van was left at the scene. The body of a resister was discovered and handed over to the Mayor of Saint-Mary. The dead man has been identified. He is SIMON Maxence living in LES PINS Charente. Forwarded to the German security service at 11.30 a.m., to the Poitiers Police Commissariat at 11.25 a.m. and to the regional prefecture at 11.30 a.m.».

The official from the Prefecture indicated in the document that there were also victims on the German side and that he had requested an investigation from the police superintendent of Haute-Vienne for a possible search for wounded people on 7 February 1944²⁹. The following day, the Prefect of Charente sent a letter to the general secretariat for maintaining order in Vichy to describe the event. He mentioned «Terrorist acts - encounter with occupying troops»³⁰ as the subject of his letter.

In addition, Police Superintendent Bernard Rousselet³¹, attached to the Political Affairs Section (S.A.P.) specialising in the fight against the Resistance and working closely with the Sipo SD, sent a report to the Prefect of Charente on 20 March 1944 in which he indicated the real reason for the movement of the German detachment in the sector : « ...this patrol was going to take up position on the demarcation line to intercept terrorist gangs coming from the southern zone, whose

acts of looting had been increasing in recent weeks. Before reaching the chosen point, the patrol came up against a van whose occupants opened fire without warning. The German soldiers fired back, disabling the vehicle³²». This is irrefutable proof that the meeting between the Bir Hacheim group and the feldgendarmes was purely coincidental. The roadblock set up that evening by the occupying troops was in no way an ambush resulting from a villainous denunciation. It was one of several elements used to control the region as part of the programme to combat the «terrorist» groups that had been operating in the Chasseneuil and Cellefrouin area since autumn 1943.

Indeed, several operations by groups of illegals had attracted the occupying forces to this area for several months. Requisitions, thefts of tobacco, cigarettes and food cards, and the disarming of French gendarmes marked the growing structuring of opposition to the collaborationist forces³³. Since the summer of 1943, the German security and repression services had been dismantling resistance movements in Charente, in particular the O.C.M. (Civil and Military Organisation). Those who escaped arrest became illegals, abandoning their civilian lives to become renegades hiding in the woods. The maquis became the place where the fight against the occupying forces was perpetuated. The forces of law and order were trying to flush out these groups of all persuasions based in Charente Limousine. The German services recruited



1. Six of Jacques Nancy's sabotage section (second from left) at the beginning of the summer of 1944 in the area of Nontron.

© Source – C.N.J.M . in LORMIER D., 2017, p. 166.

2. Photo of André Chabanne.

© Reproduction, Benoit Savy.

3. Photo of Albert Gin in the uniform of the RAC Dordogne Nord, autumn 1944 .

© Reproduction, Benoit Savy, based on HONTARREDE G. 2004, p. 109.

French intelligence agents for this, who were paid by the week and, above all, for each denunciation. The Sipo SD benefitted from these French intelligence agents, who were highly effective in flushing out groups in the French countryside.

Everything suggests that the primary mission of this Nazi detachment was in the sector of Cellefrouin³⁴. A few kilometres north of Saint-Mary, a group was created on the initiative of Aris Boutinot, a former soldier in the 30th regiment of *Chasseurs à Pied* (B.C.P. - light infantry) in the spring of 1943, the day after the call-up of class 43 to leave for S.T.O. To avoid being requisitioned, these men dug an underground sap in the forest north of Ventouse and then south of Cellefrouin. The Tino group was made up of around thirty men who wanted to retain their independence of command. They changed location several times to avoid detection and several members of the reception committee for the failed Charmes parachute drop came to take refuge there in June 1944³⁵. Contacts were established in early 1944 between the Bir Hacheim and Tino groups. At the beginning of the summer of 1944, Tino's men joined those of Commandant Chabanne and then placed themselves under the orders of Commandant Bernard to form the 107th Infantry Regiment (I.R.) on the La Rochelle - Royan front³⁶.

All in all, the theory of premeditated action by Nazi forces preceded by denunciation, built up

in a shaky manner on the basis of decades of unreliable testimony, is more the stuff of bar-room talk than a historical analysis of the facts and recently opened archives. The presence of the German detachment on the evening of 5 February 1944 was due to the activity of the Tino group in the Cellefrouin forest on the northern edge of the commune of Saint-Mary, as evidenced in their reports by the German occupying forces and the men of the S.A.P. in Poitiers.

SO WHAT WAS THIS TRUCK DOING WITH ELEVEN MEN ON BOARD, ALL LIGHTS ON, AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE VILLAGE OF SAINT-MARY ?

These men in the van were members of a group of illegals based in the village of Le Châtelars, a few kilometres northeast of Vitrac-Saint-Vincent. That evening, eleven maquisards were present in the van : Albert Gin, « Charlot » Lagarde, the Montauban brothers Georges and Marcel, Henri Bertou, Marcel Gauthier, Pierre Tournier and a few young resisters who had just joined the group, including Maxence Simon³⁷. Since the summer of 1943, around Pierre-André Chabanne³⁸, young people had been hiding in the area to escape the Compulsory Labour Service in Germany. They set up their shelter in the middle of the woods and were supplied by acquaintances near the village of Fougères. In December 1943, the cache became too small and the group moved to Le Châtelars, not far from the ruins of a priory. Pierre-André Chabanne gradually organised this group of



resisters with rigorous discipline. The logistics were difficult to set up and the weaponry was rudimentary. At that time, there were major needs to be met before an armed struggle could begin : discretion, the safety of the men and, above all, their supplies.

The weapons available were basic : a few non-confiscated shotguns and light weapons taken from the enemy or abandoned by French soldiers during the debacle. The first parachute drops of weapons, money and ammunition were for the benefit of Pierre-André Chabanne's men from April 1944 but above all intensified in the summer of 1944. Before that, resourcefulness took precedence on a daily basis to meet the basic needs of the group³⁹. In fact, the groups of illegals could count on the support of the surrounding small farmers, but it was a difficult time for everyone as the requisitions were severe. Supplying food to a group of thirty young men in the prime of their lives required very special care. Food was collected in various ways, in exchange for cash or, more often than not, for a requisition voucher issued to the farmers for deferred repayment. Of course, looting tobacco depots and stealing ration coupons or food from recalcitrant farmers completed the supply arrangements for all the groups⁴⁰. These operations inevitably alerted the German authorities to the presence of « terrorists » in an area, and the presence of the occupying forces was reinforced.

Far from being impregnated in this historical context, everything and its opposite was obviously evoked with regard to the purposes of the group's expedition : the need to make things difficult for a group of false maquisards led by « a man named Tom » hidden in the Bois des Cosses, the lure of an enormous steak at a friendly butcher's, the recovery of S.T.O. draft resisters in the Saint-Mary sector⁴¹ ...

It is hard to say today, but it is more likely, given the actions of the Chabanne group at the time, that the purpose of the nocturnal escapade was purely material : supplies for the group. In early 1944, the Bir Hacheim maquis targeted a number of militiamen, notorious collaborators and black-market profiteers. In reality, they could be credited with very few operations at the beginning of 1944. The weapons available, the military training of the maquisards, the logistical means, the presence of the occupying forces were all factors limiting the activity of the Chabanne group as well as others in the sector. In fact, its action was similar to that of the *Franc Tireurs et Partisans Français* (F.T.P.F.) maquis structured in small groups in the Confolens, Chabanais and Saint-Junien triangle, which were less active during the period than their comrades in Haute-Vienne led by Georges Guingouin. Finally, given that the relationship with the Tino group was well established at the time, it is not impossible that a meeting or joint operation could have taken place that evening between members of the two groups⁴².



1. A group of young Bir Hacheim fighters armed with British Sten guns parachuted in during the summer of 1944.

© Author's collection.

2. Claude Bonnier alias Hypothénus or Bordin, 1942.

© Author's collection.

3. Hélène Nebout alias Chef Luc surrounded by the men of Bir Hacheim in the forest in Charente Limousine in the summer of 1944.

© Author's collection.

After the clash at Saint-Mary, the group, newly named Bir Hacheim, decided to split into three sections to avoid being spotted and thus suffer the reprisals that would surely follow. New sites were hastily identified in the most discreet way to protect the men. French police officers from the Poitiers S.A.P. were sent to investigate. The German authorities wanted to dislodge the maquis by all possible means. The German army occupied the field in the following days and set up control operations in the region of Cellefrouin and Valence where three people were arrested on the following grounds of « providing accommodation and supplies to illegals » between 7 and 9 February 1944⁴³. Young men were arrested in the same area at the end of February and Sipo SD agents tortured them to obtain the information they needed to locate a group of resisters. A large-scale operation was organised on 22 March 1944 in the hamlet of Endourchapt in the commune of Saint-Laurent-de-Céris. Very quickly, the barn, which housed around thirty men, S.T.O. resisters, foreign workers and Jewish refugees, was surrounded. The ensuing panic enabled three men to flee while the others were arrested, two of them shot dead on the spot. They were taken to Pierre Levée prison in Poitiers, harshly interrogated, sentenced to death after a mock German court martial and then executed in Biard on 8 May 1944. At the same time, on market day of 22 March 1944, the town of Chasseneuil was suddenly sealed off by the Wehrmacht. After searches, arrests and grouping of suspects in the school, the Nazis set up the first interrogations. The fifty or so people arrested were transferred

that evening to the prisons in Poitiers and Angoulême ; eleven were deported.

All in all, Maxence Simon's death on the evening of 5 February 1944 is typical of that of many other young men, like his comrades at Endourchapt, who went underground to avoid going to work for the Reich across the Rhine. Caught up in a tumultuous story while only a young man, he lost his life in an unexpected skirmish with the occupying forces before the final battle for the liberation of the country had even begun. This chance meeting was not due to any betrayal by the members of the group, but rather to the recklessness of men who had flouted the most elementary principles of safety when moving groups of illegals, certainly galvanised by the meeting with D.M.R. Claude Bonnier that same evening. These men were involved at different levels in the fight against barbarism according to the tumults of a personal journey closer to the grey zone than to the watered-down Manichaeism of the television series⁴⁴.

The history of this period is still being written today thanks to the opening up of certain archives, a healthy critical distance and a less powerful myth of the Resistance. All of this combines favourably with the obsolescence of the values of resistance in terms of societal cohesion. For several decades, the mystification of a «united resistance» was politically useful in recasting the ideal of the French nation, while insidiously imposing a binary prism of analysis on historians.

Despite this, new research cannot be geared



towards the systematic questioning of a doxy built up since the 1960s. Above all, it should shed new light on the period and provide a more detailed understanding of it, without falling into the trap of sensationalism or irenicism. The sacrifice of so many lives in wartime demands the utmost methodological rigour in the quest for objective truth on the part of the contemporary historian, who is more concerned with understanding the period than with judging people.

READING NOTES / BIBLIOGRAPHY

READING NOTES

1 - This name was given to the Maquis stationed at Jaulières at the beginning of 1944 by Claude Bonnier alias Hypothénus, then Regional Military Delegate sent by London. It refers to the Battle of Bir-Hakeim, during which almost 3,500 men of the First Brigade of the *Forces françaises libres* (Free French Forces) under General Koenig resisted Rommel's troops from 26 May to 11 June 1942 in the Libyan desert a few dozen kilometres south of Tobruk. This military operation triggered the Allies' recognition of the fighting forces of *France libre*. This name resonated at the time as a hope, an encouragement to fight for the liberation of the country. Note that from the start, the men of the eponymous maquis called it Bir Ha**CH**eim instead of Bir Ha**K**eim. The author has decided to guarantee the spelling used by the members of the group at the time in February 1944.

2 - GUILLON J.M., LABORIE P., 1995, p. 341-345. The reader will be able to have a synthetic overview of the notion of memory in history in a short chapter « memory and historians ».

3 - BERLIERE J-M, 2014.

4 - This van is certainly a Type 23 or 45 that Citroën marketed in 1941 to run on gasifiers when there was a major fuel shortage during the conflict.

5 - Charente County Archives, Serie H539. The Luftwaffe is the German air force.

6 - Testimonies of Mrs. Chabanne and Albert Gin in the journal of the Special Sabotage Section (1947). He was one of the passengers in the truck that evening.

7 - Jean Arnaud was elected Mayor of the commune of Saint-Mary in the 1935 elections. He

kept his position throughout the conflict and relinquished his post as mayor in 1962.

8 - This demarcation line was put in place between June and August 1940. 1,200 km long, it separated the Northern zone administered directly by the occupying forces and the Southern zone in the hands of the Vichy government. In Charente it runs for more than 85 km, roughly isolating Charente Limousine from the rest of the department. On the roads, crossing points were guarded by German soldiers on one side and French gendarmes on the other. It passed just to the east of the town of Saint-Mary. Even though it no longer had any practical use following the invasion of the Southern Zone by German troops on 11 November 1942 in response to the Allied landings in North Africa, it was not officially abolished until 1 March 1943. The reader will find an evocation of the Saint-Mary crossing point in the memoirs of Hélène NEBOUT, pp. 9-11 and more broadly the context of the demarcation line in FARISY J., 2009.

9 - Statement of Jean Arnaud dated 6 February 1944. Charente County Archives, Serie 1W50.

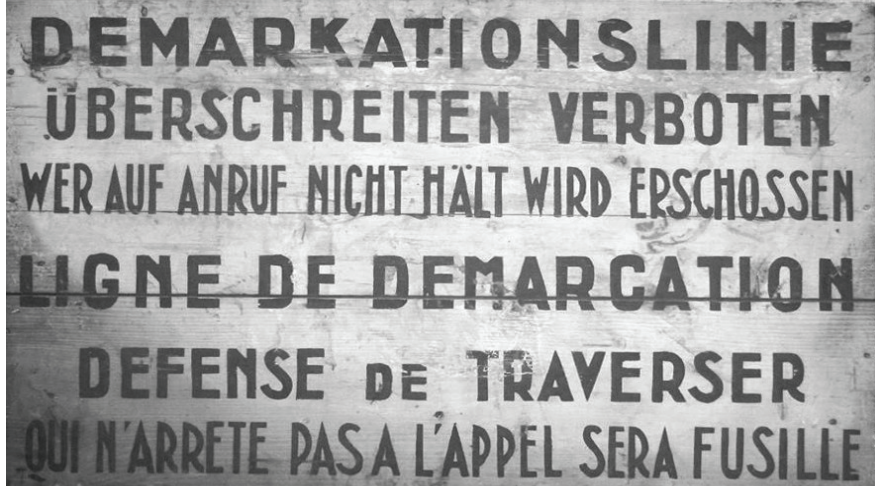
10 - Report of the handover of the body of Maxence Simon to the administrative authority dated 6 February 1944, forwarded to the prefecture of Charente on 11 February 1944. Charente County Archives, Serie 1W50. The paragraph following the note is largely inspired by this report.

11 - These paths were then described as being of common interest.

12 - Verification made by the police, this van was indeed stolen on 20 December 1943 during a

Example of a sign visible on the demarcation line.

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requisition organized at the property of Mayoux, President of the *Syndicat charentais des huiliers* (oil producers), living in Pranzac. An article in *Le Matin Charentais* dated 22 December 1943 describes the scene under the title « An armed gang loot a grocery store in Pranzac ». Charente County Archives, Serie 1PER2-71.

13 - The Bir Hacheim maquis originated from the gathering of a few young people in the hamlet of Fougères, south of the road from Chasseneuil to Cherves-Châtelars in October 1943. They obtained supplies from the nearby farms where they occasionally worked. A few weapons were gathered in the autumn of 1943 in order to provide some meagre security to the groups of S.T.O. resisters organized by Pierre-André Chabanne (alias Blanqui) and Guy Pascaud (alias You). They had very close links with the Civil and Military Organisation (O.C.M.) of Robert Geoffroy and Penchenat. Very quickly the group found echos with other members of resistance movements, the most prominent of which were *Libération Sud* with Hélène Nebout (alias chef Luc) and *Combat* of Joseph Tauja. Hélène Nebout became a member of the maquis which moved to Le Châtelars in December 1943, to a large abandoned building a few dozen metres from the ruins of the old priory.

14 - Jacques Nancy (1912-1987), a public works engineer, mobilized and prisoner in Germany in 1940, escaped in 1942 to reach London. He arrived in Charente with the mission of setting up sabotage groups in the greater West. He based himself in Charente in February 1944, first in the Horte forest then near Nontron. His small group

carried out a large number of sabotages of railway lines and power lines.

15 - Claude Bonnier (1897-1944), an aeronautical engineer in the socialist republican movement, he joined General De Gaulle in London in 1940. He was sent to France as D.M.R. to unite the resistance movements. He was clandestinely dropped off by a Lysander at Angeac in Charente on 14 November 1943. He worked for many weeks to bring together the resistance groups and those of *France Libre*. It was he, on a visit to Le Châtelars on 4 February 1944, who gave the name Bir Hacheim to the group which became that of the Secret Army 18. During his visit, he promised Pierre-André Chabanne to arm his group by asking London for parachute drops very soon. Arrested by the Gestapo in Bordeaux five days later, he committed suicide in his cell by crushing the cyanide capsule in his possession between his teeth. MARCOT et AL., 2006, p. 773.

16 - NEBOUT H., not dated, p. 26.

17 - Report of the handover of the body of Maxence Simon to the administrative authority dated 6 February 1944, forwarded to the prefecture. Charente County Archives, Serie 1W50.

18 - CORDET F., 2004, p.236. BRUN J., 2017, p. 36

19 - Sipo, short for Sicherheitspolizei, German Security Police and SD for Sicherheitsdienst which is the associated intelligence service.

20 - Charente County Archives, Serie 1W52.

21 - LORMIER D., 2017, p. 137.

22 - CANAUD J., 2011, p. 63.

23 - The first maquis were formed in 1942 by small groups in Normandy and in the Massif Central. In Haute Corrèze, Georges Guingouin



1. Young people in Champagne-Mouton in front of the old barrier of the French post

© Private collection, photo taken from the book by C. GENÉT, *Les deux Charentes sous l'Occupation et la Résistance*.

2. Photo of Guy Pascaud.

© Reproduction, Benoit Savy.

3. Checkpoint at Chavagnac, commune of Cellefrouin, along the demarcation line.

© José Délias.

was already at the head of a group of illegals in March 1942, they called themselves *Francs-Tireurs*. Despite everything, the proliferation of the maquis began in the spring of 1943 on the national territory. CANAUD J., 2011, p. 71.

24 - TROUSSARD R., 1981, p. 96.

25 - TROUSSARD R., 1981, p. 93, LEPROUX M., 1947.

26 - CORDET F., 2004. HONTARREDE G., 1987.

27 - Charente County Archives, Serie 1W50 et 1W52.

28 - BRUN J., 2016, p. 149-150.

29 - Charente County Archives, Serie 1W50. It should be noted that the Charente Libre was placed under Haute-Vienne administration by the Vichy regime. The entire area of the extended Confolentais at that time was under the control of the prefecture of Limoges.

30 - Charente County Archives, Serie 1W50.

31 - Bernard Rousselet had been the head of the S.A.P. department since November 1942. This 35-year-old former communist teacher, who joined the police force in 1936, was described as intelligent and above all focused on the future of his career. His department was responsible for 465 arrests, nearly 200 deportations and 72 shot. BERLIERE JM., CHABRUN L., 2001, p. 186-187. AUGUSTIN JM., 1995, p. 208-225.

32 - Charente County Archives, Serie 1W50.

33 - *Commission Départementale de l'Information Historique pour la Paix*, 1989, p. 44-47.

34 - HONTARREDE G., 1987, p. 345. The author provides an additional piece of information not mentioned in the text from a German archive.

35 - This failed parachute operation took place on 20 June 1944 in the town of Charme. The

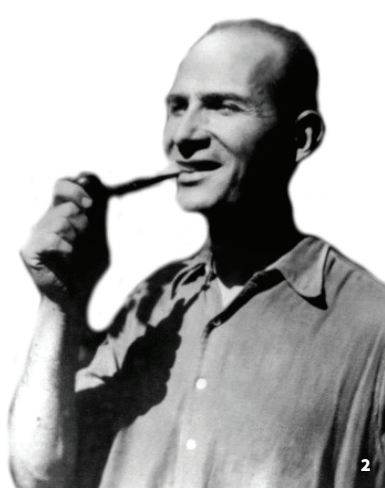
equipment was recovered by the Angoulême feldgendarmarie and the hunt for the presumed recipients was quickly organised. Some members of the commando came to seek safety in the forest in the Tino group.

36 - Information sheets concerning a large number of the officers of the Bernard regiment are available at the Gironde County Archives, 74W250.

37 - Among these men, three participated on 29 September 1943 in the derailment of the train on the Bordeaux-Paris line at Vars in Charente.

38 - Pierre-André Chabanne, (1914-1963), a teacher born in Cherves-Châtelars, was mobilised in 1940 and quickly taken prisoner. He managed to escape after two unsuccessful attempts and returned to his country. In 1943, he joined the resistance movement of the Civil and Military Organization (O.C.M.) and, with his friend Guy Pascaud, organized a maquis in the Cherves-Châtelars region to shield local young people from Compulsory Labour Service (S.T.O.). In February 1944, between thirty and forty of them were in hiding. In the summer of 1944, he was at the head of more than a thousand men and took an active part in the liberation of Angoulême. Commandant Chabanne led the Military Subdivision of Saintes in September 1944 and his men formed the 6th Infantry Regiment (I.R.) engaged in the fighting on the Royan-La Rochelle front. He became a Member of Parliament in 1945 and then returned to his life as a teacher until his death in a traffic accident on 13 February 1963 on the Saintes-Cognac road.

39 - A report by Lieutenant-Colonel Bernard



recounts his positions not far from the group of men held by Pierre-André Chabanne at the same time. He says, « *Supplies were the most difficult problem to solve* ». Charente County Archives, Serie 18J30.

40 - Charente County Archives, Série 18J30.

41 - BRUN J., 2016, p 149-150. The author most certainly confused the two surnames Tom and Tino alias Aris Boutinot. TROUSSARD R., 1981, p. 93. This group was in no way a «false maquis», the reader can refer to the book by GRENARD F., 2011 on this rather controversial subject...

42 - HONTARREDE G., 2004, p. 228.

43 - CORDET D., 2004, p. 236. They were France Pauillac, Eugénie Servant and Maurice Jaquet.

44 - PRIMO LEVI draws from his experience as a deportee the concept of a grey zone for which the responsibility and complicity of all human relations have blurred contours and fluctuate over time. Very present in his work, the reader can refer to the reading « *Des Naufragés et des rescapés* » (*The Drowned and the Saved*).

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Checkpoint at Mouchedune, commune of Parzac, along the demarcation line.

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MAXENCE SIMON, THE FIRST OF THE BIR HACHEIM MAQUIS KILLED IN ACTION

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S. ALBERTELLI, J. BLANC, L. DOUZOU, *La lutte clandestine en France - Une histoire de la Résistance 1940-1944*, Seuil, 429p.

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