

# EUROPE'S MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY

Behind the gaunt, shy figure of General de Gaulle is rising a strange and gallant army. Our correspondent in Syria, who talked with De Gaulle and lived with his men, radioed this heartbreaking story of free sons of France who shed the blood of their countrymen rather than surrender to Hitler

By

WIRELESS

. . . FROM CAIRO

by **GORDON GASKILL**



WHEN I met General de Gaulle I told him about a friend of mine, Madame Louise, a fine old Frenchwoman in Cairo who marches about doing her housework roaring the *Marseillaise*, and sometimes jabbing an imaginary sword at imaginary Germans. "And each night," I told him, "she says an *especial* prayer for you."

"Tell Madame Louise," he replied instantly, "that I thank her with all my heart, but tell her to pray for France and not for Charles de Gaulle."

This helped to answer some of the questions which brought me to Syria: First, what kind of a man leads Free France? Second, what type of men



## MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY



France? Second, what type of men joined his strange army? Third, what actually happened in Syria when, for the first time in more than a century, Frenchmen fought Frenchmen?

I still can't tell much about the man, who was born in 1890 and christened Charles de Gaulle. Few people can, except De Gaulle himself and, I suppose, Madame de Gaulle. True, I talked with him in the lovely hilltop Residency at Beirut, Syria, overlooking the blue Mediterranean and a garden mad with color. I can tell you that he sat at a dainty table far too small for his six-feet-six, that at first I failed to recognize him without a cap; that if his mustache were a bit darker it would look embarrassingly like Hitler's; that his handclasp is gentle and pressureless. When a friend of his once tactfully suggested a stronger handclasp, De Gaulle replied mildly that he saw no virtue in crushing a man's fingers.

His kepi, lying upside down, bore only a brigadier general's two silver stars—the lowest French general rank—which he attained a month before France collapsed. Under him today are several generals of higher rank. As Chief of State for Free France, De Gaulle might reasonably assume five stars as General of the Army, but when somebody suggested it to him, De Gaulle, horrified, stared the fellow down.

To conceal his immense shyness, De Gaulle sometimes adopts a distant manner which some find annoyingly regal. Actually, he is terrified to meet new people. Once, when forced to visit a fashionable Cairo hotel, he implored and finally ordered an aide to accompany him, because he couldn't bear to meet strangers alone.

He speaks English passably, but rarely does, because he is afraid of being ridiculed. Except for infrequent times when my limping French sufficed, we spoke through an aide interpreter.

I asked him what above all else he wanted from America, and he replied,



## MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY

"We need arms, arms, arms. We want help under the Lease-Lend Act." He then recited the famous phrase about "Giving aid to all countries resisting aggression."

"Are we not resisting aggression?" he asked, and I had to say yes, and that I personally saw no reason why they shouldn't get American help. Then, without any questioning by me, he volunteered this statement:

"If America goes to war, Free France will gladly and freely give any bases within our power. This means bases in the South Pacific, along the vital West Coast of Africa near Dakar, and in Syria."

I asked him if he wanted to be formally recognized by America as the true French Government, but he declined to discuss this, saying, "That's a matter for the Americans to decide."

Elsewhere, however, I found the Free French hurt and puzzled by the American attitude. They can't understand why we deny them the recognition and help we freely grant other exile governments. They are especially worried lest America still thinks she can somehow wean General Weygand from Vichy.

I talked to a ranking official who was once Weygand's close friend and perhaps has seen him more recently than any other Allied (Continued on page 92) leader. "America is making a ghastly mistake," he told me with impressive sincerity, "if she thinks that Weygand will ever leave Vichy or wants to. Believe me, Weygand is more worn out, and has less will to resist than even Petain himself. It is desperately important that Americans realize that."

De Gaulle shrugged aside all personal questions. He has managed to conceal his own personality to an extent baffling to Americans, who must know their heroes' neckties and how many cigarettes they smoke daily. While I was in Syria, a local newspaper created a sensation by printing a picture of De Gaulle and his son. Most people didn't know he had a son. I tried to imagine Americans not knowing about Roosevelt's children. The truth is that, to followers of De Gaulle, he is not a human being at all; he is a symbol, like the Flag.

Above all, De Gaulle has the gift of great language. As a Frenchman put it, "De Gaulle's voice is France. When he speaks, you can hear the *Marseillaise*."

Almost literally, he has built Free France from magnificent words. The miracle began on June 18, 1940, when he stepped before a London microphone with defiant, solemn appeal, beginning, "I, Charles de Gaulle, General of France," and ending superbly, "Soldiers of France, wherever you may be, arise!"

This was truly France talking, the real McCoy. His words were trumpets crying out



## MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY

to battle, drums rolling out, the charge, the Tricolor flying in the sunlight. And, like flaming arrows, they sped into the heart of every Frenchman who remembered Jeanne d'Arc, the Bastille, and Verdun. In numbed France herself, and half a world away, Frenchmen donned their uniforms again, and, like iron filings to a magnet, began flocking to De Gaulle.

De Gaulle began telling me about some of his men. As he talked, his eyes flashed proudly, and once he said, "Never before in all history, in all the world, was there such an army."

**I THINK** he is right. I traveled through Syria for six weeks, bearing a letter from De Gaulle permitting me to inspect the army, talking without restraint with the men and living in their camps. And I say, very seriously, that one day the story of Free France will rank with that of Jeanne d'Arc.

Not all are heroes. Naturally, as in any such group, some are turncoats, fainthearts, rolling stones. But when you etch away this dross there still remains a golden gallantry beyond belief. Here, picked almost at random, are some of the men I talked to:

A young aviator who, after the fall of France, discussed all night with his wife what he should do. He decided that, cost what it might, he should leave her to join De Gaulle. He couldn't get enough petrol to fly to England, but he heard there was an English ship on a certain spot off the French coast. He flew there, crashed on the beach, breaking his arm, and the ship's boat rescued him. He hasn't heard from his wife in ten months.

Four army officers who, armed with pistols and disguised as sailors, boarded an 8,000-ton ship at Marseilles with a million-dollar cargo bound for Italy. At night they confronted the captain and forced him to drop out of the convoy. Next morning, argument and pistols convinced the rest of the crew. The ship went to Gibraltar and eventually to England.

A young captain who, with a brother officer, made a daring escape from Syria, dressing like Arabs, hiring two Arab guides, spending four days in the great, barren mountains, and crossing into Palestine. They loaded two pack mules with all the fighting equipment they could carry. "We wanted to save every bullet for the Boche," the captain told me.

A priest who laid aside his robes to command a battalion.

A sixty-seven-year-old veteran, decorated in the last war, who quit his job as a professor of gymnastics, to follow De Gaulle.

Spahis who made a bold escape soon after Free France was formed. As the battalion, in full fighting garb, was returning from maneuvers, their commandant suddenly ordered a change in route and led them into Palestine. This commandant suddenly asked me, "Have you ever thought what side Clemenceau would be on today? I think I can tell you, for his grandson was a



## MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY

lieutenant under me. He was killed in action before Damascus fighting for Free France."

**I** DINED at Damascus with General Collet, who told me how he finally lost faith in Vichy, how he and his wife, alone, drove an auto over the trackless desert toward Trans-Jordan, how he received salutes at the last outposts from sentries ignorant of his desertion, how he met at the border his famous Circassian Cavalry Regiment, whom he had sent "on maneuvers."

In a Beirut café I drank arrack and sang *Madelon* with four sailors who told me how they had been caught in Canada at the collapse of France and spent a year joining De Gaulle. Eventually I asked their names. The first replied, "Jacques Bonhomme," and I wrote it down. I turned to the next, who replied, gravely, "Jacques Bonhomme." I suddenly realized they were giving me the French equivalent of "John Public."

"Sorry," one of them explained, grinning, "but if anybody in France learned that we were fighting with De Gaulle, God help our families."

On a barren hill outside of Damascus I saw perhaps the strangest unit of this strangest army—a Pacific Expeditionary Force from the French South Sea Islands. These are men who like to say De Gaulle joined them, rather than vice versa, because, even before Free France existed, the Islands refused to accept defeat. A few of these Tahitians are homesick and the change of climate has given many of them colds, but they have brought courage and music.

One night I sat with them under the moon and stars and listened to their singing. I cannot tell you how I felt to hear a half-hundred guitars and ukuleles playing the *Marseillaise* and to hear its defiant words from little brown men who, of their own free will, had journeyed half the world to fight for France—a France they have never seen.

Of such men are the armies of Free France.

I drove from Palestine north past Tyre and Sidon along a lovely sea road where shortly before the Allied Army had fought its way.

Here, turned on its side, was a blasted French tank. There, five twisted French armored cars, and, amidst the debris, a soldier's crushed, torn steel helmet.

Great cliffs where the French had cunningly concealed machine-gun nests in caves were blasted, pitted by shells from the British fleet.

**T**HESE were physical scars of the Syrian war, but I think the deepest scars are on the hearts of the Frenchmen who fought in it.

You will recall that Syria first rejected the armistice, but Weygand made a flying visit and she then accepted Vichy. Then began bitter days of which the world still knows little. First came a strong effort to bolster Petain's personal prestige. Badges appeared with "France First," and Petain's initials. Also, a flood of Petain photographs, which everybody was forced to buy, with notable



## MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY

exceptions.

One high official at Aleppo refused to hang Petain's picture. When accused of disloyalty, he pointed to a huge picture of Clemenceau and retorted, "He was a good Frenchman, *n'est ce pas?*" To a street vendor who asked five francs for Petain's picture, another retorted, "What? Five francs! You can buy Petain himself for only two!"

A third kept De Gaulle's picture hidden in a dictionary opposite the encircled word, "Liberty."

The second anti-British campaign fostered by the Germans began with surprising success. In one town a Vichy officer slapped a three-year-old girl for making a "V" sign. Later he apologized to her father and said, "I was so angry at seeing the accursed British victory sign that I lost my temper."

Another Vichy officer told me the following astounding story:

"I was commanding a company before Damascus, so near the enemy that I could hear the commands given in French, and I realized we faced Free Frenchmen. I am not sentimental, but I tell you, my friend, that I grew weak and wept and could not give the order to fire. Then I noticed that the Frenchmen wore British helmets, and I thought, 'The pigs!' and I became a man again and a soldier, and fired—not on Frenchmen, but on British helmets."

The British troops were amazed to hear the French captives say, "Kill me quickly. Don't torture me as you did the rest." A high Vichy official, awaiting deportation, told me quite frankly why the French turned so quickly against the British: "If England had surrendered soon after France we wouldn't be hating her now. But every day she resists so magnificently makes us more ashamed of ourselves, and you know shame is not far from hate."

The Syrian war was Gethsemane for both sides. On one side were the Free French, determined to save Syria from the Germans but torn by the idea of killing their countrymen. "If we are brave enough to fight other Frenchmen," one told me soberly, "we are brave enough for anything."

On the other side the Vichy French were driven by a feeling which one officer put this way: "For a year the world has been saying we are cowards. We had to show them Frenchmen still know how to fight and die."

The Free French made what I think was the most magnificent gesture in the entire Syrian war. They were ordered to a desperate attack against a hill strongly held by Vichy forces. "We will take the hill," they replied, "but in our own way." They slung their rifles over their shoulders, out of firing position, and began, not charging, not firing, but merely walking up the hill. A burst of fire from the hilltop killed three of them, but the rest neither fired back nor faltered, but kept walking, walking, walking. The Vichy guns faltered, stopped, and the Free French walked to the top. Vichy gunners wouldn't shoot Frenchmen who wouldn't shoot back.



## MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY

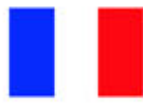
When the war ended, Vichy troops had to make the heart-rending decision of whether to join De Gaulle or return to France. Some Vichy officers went to extraordinary lengths to keep their men. They threatened to hold up their pay, confiscate their postal savings in France, and, worst of all, made ominous threats about their families.

Yet I know a Free French chaplain who went to see an especially bitter Vichy major, and within thirty minutes the major was weeping, and called his battalion together to say, "You are free to join De Gaulle if you wish." Most of them did.

**A FRIEND** of mine in Beirut, a Free French captain, was highly respected by both sides, and his office became a sort of confessional where Vichy men came to seek advice. He told them, "In your hearts you know the only real enemy of France is Germany. If you go home, you become just another hostage to Hitler, another mouth poor France must feed. There you cannot fight Germany, but here you can, side by side with other Frenchmen and British allies." Most of them agreed to stay. When Vichy ships came to repatriate the men, half the crews deserted to De Gaulle, some even jumping overboard and swimming ashore.

One night I watched 102 sailors join up with the Free French. There was no formal ceremony, but one by one they came up, gave their names, received the double-barred cross of Lorraine, shook hands, and went on to meet their new comrades. When I asked one new recruit what he thought of the De Gaullists, he replied, "They're real Frenchmen," then added bitterly, "the first ones I've seen in a long time!"

Bereft of crews, some Vichy ships were weeks late in sailing. I went to the dock to see the last one leave. Stiff at attention stood a British guard of honor, and a British band crashed out the *Marseillaise*. The French ship drifting out to sea dipped the Tricolor in salute. It was a fantastic, unreal scene—honoring a defeated enemy and former ally. All about me I saw many eyes filled with tears and I couldn't see quite clearly myself.

I think the tragedy of France was most dramatically told in a field outside Damascus. Here Frenchmen had fought Frenchmen bitterly, and many Vichy dead were buried where they fell, under white wooden crosses. On one cross, under a man's name, is this phrase painted in black letters: "A soldier of France," and written beneath it in pencil: "So was the man who killed him." 

THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE

JANUARY 1942

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)