

The French-Russian Connection

With Russian Yaks, a small group of French pilots fought like hell to drive the Germans out of the Soviet Union.

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By war's end, the French pilots had scored 129 victories against the Luftwaffe. (Von Hardesty/NASM)

The Niemen River, which rises near Minsk and meanders toward the Baltic, has long been the boundary armies cross to invade Russia—and cross again, in tattered retreat. In June 1812, Napoleon Bonaparte sent half a million soldiers along this route, Moscow bound. Six months later, 10,000 or so survivors stumbled out of Russia, harried by the Russian winter and mounted bands of Cossacks.

In the summer of 1941, Adolph Hitler's army followed Napoleon's trail into Russia. Three and a half years and hundreds of thousands of casualties later, they were back on the Niemen, fleeing into Poland and East Prussia. This time the harrying fire was from swarms of aircraft, including Yakovlev Yak-3 fighters flown by the Normandie-Niemen regiment of the Forces Aériennes Françaises Libres—the Free French Air Force. By then, everyone in Russia had heard of "the French Pilots"—a small band of volunteers who since early 1943 had been flying and dying in Russia's defense.

For many of these pilots, the road to the Eastern Front began as France prepared to surrender to Germany in June 1940. On June 18, just four days before it concluded armistice

negotiations, France sent most of its pilots and airworthy warbirds to continue the fight against Hitler from colonial bases in North Africa. At the very least, officials in the falling government believed, the move would keep the aircraft out of Nazi hands.

The plan didn't quite work; the new Vichy government—named for the French city where the new, nominally sovereign French regime was set up to govern southern France and the Francophone northern rim of Africa—quickly absorbed the forces that had escaped to Algeria. The Curtiss 75A Hawks, Bloch 152s, and Moraine-Salnier MS-406s that had fought the Germans were turned against the British, as were the new Dewoitine D-520s that had proved effective against Germany's Bf-109E.

But even as those airplanes flew south, another French government was forming. Exiled Brigadier General Charles de Gaulle, in a broadcast from London, urged his compatriots to rally around the banner of France Libre. France's disaffected pilots responded. From the Etampes flight school south of Paris, Roland de la Poype and the others in his graduating class followed their commandant to England. Marcel Albert, Albert Durand, and Marcel Lefèvre—having flown about a dozen missions against the British—defected in their D-520s to Gibraltar and were placed in a Royal Air Force Spitfire squadron. Joseph Risso and two fellow pilots also made it to Gibraltar—in a four-place Caudron C-630 Simoun (Sandstorm) they "borrowed" in Algeria. Pierre Pouyade, who commanded a night-fighter unit in Cambodia, escaped to China in an old Potez 25 biplane and eventually found his way to London. One by one or group by group, French pilots peeled off for England, most of them in their early 20s, guided by a few old men nearing 30.

Hitler thrust more than three million troops into the Soviet Union in June 1941, and de Gaulle saw an opportunity for his government-in-exile. He was inclined to send a division of the Free French army to the Russian front—a move he hoped would garner Moscow's formal recognition of his government. The commander of the just-assembled Forces Aériennes Françaises Libres, Brigadier General Martial Valin, persuaded him that a small air force unit would produce the desired effect, with fewer moving parts.

Word of what promised to be an excellent adventure went out to the FAFL units in Great Britain and North Africa. Fifteen pilots volunteered. They were led by Joseph Pouliquen, then the commander of a fighter group in North Africa. Captain Jean Tulasne, who flew for the RAF in Cairo, was second in command. Several interpreters, a doctor, and 40-odd technicians brought the unit's initial strength to 62.

The pilots did not volunteer out of a desire to defend Communism. "At our level," says Joseph Risso, "nothing was political. It was a decision of General de Gaulle himself." Risso lives today in Cadolive, the French village where he was born. His friend Marcel Albert, who lives in Florida with an American wife, remembers the group's single-mindedness. The men were, Albert says, "just fighting the Germans." Not everyone approved. Some of de Gaulle's staffers detested the idea of French pilots flying for the Soviet Union, and the British—always wary of

the French general's ambitions and loath to lose pilots then flying with the RAF—dragged their feet.

It was not until August that the volunteers began their long slog to the Eastern Front. They traveled to Lagos, Nigeria, by boat, then flew to Cairo. As they sailed south, the FAFL gave the unit a new moniker in line with General Valin's new practice of naming air wings after French provinces. "Alsace" had already gone to GC.1; "Ile de France" to GC.2. GC.3 would henceforth be known as Escadrille Normandie.

On November 10, two days after the Allies had begun the invasion of North Africa, the volunteers arrived in Lebanon, where they met de Gaulle and got their Soviet visas and some orientation training. Two days later, they flew to Baghdad aboard three U.S. C-47 transports. The group took a train to Basra, Iraq, and then was trucked to Ahvas, Iran, to catch another train for Tehran. By the time GC.3 pulled into that city, the Vichy airmen in North Africa had been told by their general that they too would fly as Free French, in British and U.S. aircraft.

On November 28, 1942, Escadrille Normandie boarded three Li.2s (Russian-built DC-3s) and finally crossed into the Soviet Union, landing at Baku. Then, as the descending winter permitted, the airplanes shuttled the men to a base at Ivanovna, 150 miles northeast of Moscow.

"It was 30, 40 below zero," says Albert. "We had no clothes to start with. We're out there with gabardine. They gave us coats and pants with fur and boots."

These were bleak days for the Soviet Union. By the time Escadrille Normandie arrived, Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) was in its second year of siege, Kharkov was lost, and the German fist was closing around the industrial region of the Donets River basin. Nazi Panzers had been looking down Moscow's throat for a year. Stalingrad was in its third terrible month of street fighting, and three million Russians had been taken prisoner. The arrival of the French offered a glimmer of hope.

"The Russians liked us," Albert says. "There was one who told us we boosted their morale. They thought they were finished and then we are there. They said they thought we knew something they didn't."

At Ivanovna, the Normandie volunteers trained in the two-seat Yakovlev-7, then the Yak-1B fighter, which the pilots had chosen over U.S. and British alternatives. The -1B, like most Soviet fighters of the day, was built of steel tubing, light alloys, and wood. It was a powerful aircraft: fast, highly maneuverable, and heavily armed—"an airborne cannon and guns," says Risso.

The French took to it immediately. According to Albert, the Russian airplane cruised faster and climbed better than the Spitfire and the Bf-109. "As easy to fly as a kite," says Roland de la Poype, who lives in Paris today. "But if you dived over 500 miles an hour, you could lose the wings."

On March 19, the unit was deemed sufficiently trained to leave for the front. Three days later, GC.3 joined the Soviet 303rd Air Division at Polotniani-Zavod airfield, southwest of Moscow. On the 26th, Albert, de la Poype, and Risso flew the Normandie regiment's first sortie over Russia: They scrambled after a German reconnaissance airplane but made no contact. On April 5, flying cover for Petlyakov Pe-2 bombers, two pilots in the group, Albert Durand and Albert Preziosi, shared first blood: a Focke-Wulf 190.

In the squadron log, Jean Tulasne, who in February had succeeded Poliquen as Normandie commander, wrote, "The squadron has arrived at the front during full thaw...the worst period of the Russian year.... The still-cold temperatures require a longer start of the engines (hot water and hot oil). The mechanics work about 14 hours per day. Moving the airplane on the ground between the stalls and the runway requires some 30-45 minutes and the help of all the squadron personnel. This for all the airplanes before and on their return from a mission.... The Soviet personnel have freed the only comfortable building on the base to billet the squadron. The food is excellent from every point of view: quantity and quality. Wine fairly often. Vodka for the pilots and mechanics each day there is a combat mission."

Morale was "excellent," according to Tulasne, but these were definitely new conditions for his men. "Fighting was entirely different," recalls Risso. "Yak aircraft had no bad-weather instruments. Furthermore, the radio equipment was far from the VHF used in England." And, Risso explains, "as the Soviets had no radar, the aerodromes were close to the frontline—about 20, 25 kilometers [12 to 15 miles]. Once, we did operate as close as five kilometers from the front." These "aerodromes" were spartan affairs. Albert remembers "no roads, no wire, no electric, no water—nothing."

Events seemed to confirm that Normandie's arrival had changed Russia's luck. Since the group had begun operations in November, what remained of Stalingrad had come back into Soviet hands, along with thousands of German prisoners. Russia—aided as always by a merciless winter—wore down the invaders, who were slowly driven back toward the Niemen.

Trailing the Soviet armor and infantry by only a few kilometers, the Normandie squadron moved from airfield to airfield: from Polotniani-Zavod in March, to Mosalsk in April, to Koziel in May, to Hationki in June. The billeting deteriorated to shelters made of branches and rope, and then the abandoned hovels of peasants. Pilots were lucky to get sausage; mere technicians got potatoes. The airplanes were kept in improvised revetments, disguised by branches and nets. In May, German Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm Keitel paid the Normandie squadron a grim compliment: He ordered that all French pilots captured on the Russian front be executed. "We didn't know anything about Keitel's order until the Nuremberg trial in November 1946," recalls Risso. "What I can say is that 28 of ours were missing. Only three came [back] from prisoners' camps: Mahé, Bayssade, Feldzer."

By mid-summer 1943, as Russian aircraft regained control of the skies above the Eastern Front, it was clear to all concerned that the era of German air supremacy was over. But the westward trail from Moscow to the Niemen hadn't been kind to the Frenchmen. While Soviet

forces fought their way toward Smolensk that April, two French pilots were killed in action. Another was lost in June. Squadron commander Tulasne and three more died in July.

"The Germans were scared of us," says Albert, but he adds that General Petit wasn't satisfied. " 'We want more victories at any cost!' " he snarls, imitating the general. "Bastard."

French pilots had begun trading their exhausted Yak-1s for Yak-9s, fighters that were optimized for high performance at low altitude—as many a Luftwaffe pilot discovered while trying to turn with the Russian fighter near the ground. The Yak-9 had a teardrop canopy for better visibility and wings strong enough to hold internal fuel cells. Some -9s had a small bomb compartment behind the pilot. Some were tank killers, with a big 37-mm cannon replacing the 20-mm gun in the nose, and the cockpit shifted a half-meter aft to accommodate the breech.

In July, the squadron's mechanics returned to North Africa and were replaced by Soviets, who were familiar with the new and more powerful Russian airplane. In August, the Normandie group moved to a field in Gorodichina. "The mechanics rode in the back seat of the Yak-9," recorded Tulasne's successor, Colonel Pierre Pouyade, in the squadron log. "The pilots were received in a very amicable fashion by the Russian officers of the regiment, and were profoundly touched by their attention. At the entrance to the rooms were streamers bearing the inscription, TO THE BRAVE SONS OF THE FRENCH PEOPLE, WHO WITH OUR VALIANT ALLIES, WILL VANQUISH THE EXECRABLE ENEMY. In the evening, good cheer, vodka. Cinema was an agreeable surprise."

But all was not well. General Petit wrote de Gaulle that life on the Russian front had become very hard, especially as the unit developed "a sense of being abandoned." To make matters worse, the men were not being paid. The acerbic Pouyade wrote: "The greetings of Soviet officials replace the money of the French command."

According to Albert, the pilots came close to getting paid only once. "Stalin decided to pay our salaries," he says. "We were not getting any money—30-some months in Russia without pay. Stalin said, 'Okay, I'm going to pay these guys in dollars.' He had a big sack of money. We were [to get] \$750—at that time a pile of dough. But [General Petit] said, 'We are not fighting for money.' That one—he was not fighting at all."

Quips Roland de la Poype, "Pay? We never had a problem. We never got anything. Rien."

In September, Normandie divided into two squadrons: The first, Rouen, was led by Marcel Albert, with Roland de la Poype on his wing. The second, Le Havre, was commanded by Didier Béguin, with Risso on his wing. That month, Albert Durand—with nine individual and two shared kills—vanished in action on the road toward Minsk. Another pilot went down in October. By then, says Albert, "we were about finished." Normandie's handful of survivors fell back to Toula, south of Moscow, to train the new pilots shuttling in from Free French forces in North Africa. Two more squadrons were formed: Cherbourg, commanded by Marcel Lefèvre, and Caen, led by Louis Delfino.

The second campaign opened in May 1944 with the Normandie regiment back at the front, at a rough field near Doubrovka. There, the commandant's diary continued its refrain of loss. Henri Foucaud was killed in late April. In May, returning from a mission over Vitebsk, Marcel Lefèvre's Yak-9 hemorrhaged fuel and burst into flames a few feet off the ground; he died in a Moscow hospital a month later. (He survives in spirit as a host figure at the Normandie regiment museum in his home town, Les Andelys.) In July, Maurice de Seynes' Yak filled with gas fumes, but he refused to bail out because his Russian mechanic, seated in cramped space behind him, had no parachute. Both men died after several aborted approaches to the field at Mikountani. Camille-Jean Bertrand was killed in August, as the offensive near Kaunas pushed the invaders back across the Niemen River.

The regiment was by then transitioning to the Yakovlev Yak-3. "It is an excellent machine," an enthusiastic Pouyade wrote, "superior to the FW 190 in all the dimensions. In everyone's opinion, it is probably the best fighter plane of the armies of the world. It is one of the fastest and, in every case, the lighter and more maneuverable airplane, the best climber of the world. Visibility is perfect."

As 1944 wore on, however, the pace of combat slackened, along with the flow of news and supplies. The war was clearly winding down. De Gaulle had returned to liberated Paris in August; France was free. Why were French pilots still in Russia?

"Because of the persistent lack of fuel, of airplanes, of flight operations," a dejected Pouyade wrote his general, "the morale of all the pilots is very bad. Our inactivity menaces [the] aeronautical prestige which Normandie has gained thus far. In consequence, I propose the withdrawal of operations, with the return of the regiment to France where it can be sent immediately to a sector where it shall surely find work. If [this] is unacceptable I have the honor of asking that I be relieved of my command." Pouyade departed on November 11. Delfino assumed his role.

Less than a week later, there was bigger news. "Yesterday we heard, by radio that General de Gaulle has been invited to come to Moscow," Delfino wrote on November 17. "All hope to see him come to the Regiment." Just days after that, Albert and de la Poype were named Heroes of the Soviet Union.

For its role in ejecting the German invaders, the unit got a new designation from Premier Joseph Stalin: Normandie-Niemen, the second name after the historic river. In December, the regiment traveled by special train to Moscow to meet the visiting de Gaulle, and the men were awarded French and Soviet medals all around.

The air wing's war wore on, though, along with the hard winter. "The snow still falls and we pass a solitary Christmas in our rooms," noted Delfino. "Now and then a bottle of cognac appears." Of the regiment's original pilots—only six had survived—none fought in the short campaign of spring 1945. "We were sent to France to rest according to General de Gaulle's decision," says Risso. Albert got typhus and nearly died.

Two weeks after Germany's May 9 surrender, five Dakotas flew into Insterbourn to take the regiment back to Moscow, where they paid their respects to comrades buried in the foreigners' cemetery. That night, Jacques André and Marcel Lefèvre were posthumously named Heroes of the Soviet Union. Party followed party. "New reception at the French embassy," wrote Delfino. "Lots of music, lots of people, little to drink."

The idea had been for the regiment to return the way it had come: by way of the Middle East. But on June 9, General Petit sent a telegram relaying a message from Stalin: "As he considers that 'Normandie-Niemen' has fought very well on the Soviet front, it does not seem just to disarm it and remove its materiel. It is proposed that the pilots of Normandie-Niemen return to France with their combat aircraft." Delfino recorded the pilots' response: "A joyous reaction."

At six that evening on June 15, 40 Yak-3s lifted off for Prague. Five days later, after several stops and parties and a few losses, 37 touched down at Le Bourget airport in Paris.

The Normandie-Niemen regiment left quite a record in its wake: 5,240 missions flown, 273 confirmed kills, 37 probable, and 45 enemy aircraft sorely damaged. Among the unit's 39 aces, Marcel Albert led with 22 confirmed kills, one probable, and two more in other theaters. Roland de la Poype ranked second, with 16, two probables, and two aircraft damaged. Joseph Risso finished at ninth place: 11 kills, four probables. But the regiment's victories had not come cheap: Of the 96 pilots who went to Russia, 46 did not return.

Only about a dozen of the Normandie-Niemen pilots who served in Russia are alive today, and only three of the first group survive—the same trio that shared the first Normandie sortie. In old photographs, one sees three very different young men—Albert, a former Renault mechanic, rough and ready, impatient of authority; the aristocratic de la Poype, languid in his boots and riding britches; Risso, the reflective southerner, always working on his pipe.

Marcel Albert crashed a D-520 during an air show in Paris; he flew very little after that. He met his wife, Freda, while he was the French air attaché to Prague, and moved to the United States in 1947. After working in the restaurant business, the couple settled in the Florida panhandle, in a roomy bungalow rich with Normandie-Niemen memorabilia.

Roland de la Poype stayed with aviation but made his fortune as an inventor of disposable plastic containers, among many other things. He and his artist wife Marie-Noëlle live in a lavish Paris apartment a half-mile west of the Trocadero. They have participated in a variety of enterprises, including the Marineland Antibes theme park, where they have bred orcas and dolphins. "I found fun everywhere," says de la Poype. "I've been born under a lucky star."

Risso rose through the ranks of the French air force and retired as a brigadier general in 1971, returning to Cadolive.

One wonders, when talking to them, how they were treated once the glow of World War II chilled into the cold war, and the Soviets became the enemy. Were the Normandie-Niemen anciens made to pay for their Russian adventure?

Albert barely understands the question. He views those old days without a cold war filter. Russian gratitude still touches him, and his memories of Soviet comrades still bring a smile. But he also remembers meeting French POWs late in the war who derided the pilots as Communists.

De la Poype says little on the subject, but his wife acknowledges that after the war, "there was a definite tendency to see the Normandie-Niemen pilots as Communists. De Gaulle kept this from happening—it needed somebody that powerful," she says. "He wiped away the problem."

During a long military career, Risso has viewed the Soviet Union through both lenses, but never sensed adverse vibrations from either side. "One should remember," he says, "that Normandie-Niemen still carries on exchanges with the Russian squadron." For example, pilots from the modern Normandie-Niemen unit's successor squadron traveled to Russia in June 2001 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War. During the event, the French pilots flew Russian Su-27s, and the Russians, French Mirages. And as of 1989, Risso says, 144 schools in the Soviet Union still bore the name Normandie-Niemen.

Although the three old friends meet infrequently now, each is intensely and affectionately interested in how the others are doing. You talked to Albert? Is he well? Is he fat? How did you find de la Poype? Tell Risso I send my love. As you listen, the years fall away, and voilà! — there are those young men in the Yakovlevs. The French Pilots.