Memoirs: The War Years

René Galand

Wellesley College

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Memoirs: The War Years

I was born in 1923, in the small Breton town of Kastell Nevez ar Fav (Châteauneuf-du-Faou in French). In the twenties, the people of Western Brittany still spoke the Breton language which their ancestors had brought from Great Britain at the time of the Anglo-Saxon invasions, between the Vth and the VIIth century: they had chosen to settle in Brittany, then sparsely inhabited, rather than submit to the more powerful invaders. During World War II, their descendants displayed the same spirit of independence under the German occupation, as evidenced by the fact that one half of De Gaulle's Free French and one third of the French Forces of the Interior (the fighting arm of the French Résistance) were made up of Bretons. The significance of these figures becomes apparent when one considers that the population of Brittany is only one tenth of the total French population.

At the start of World War II, in 1939, my parents had been settled in America for several years, but they had wanted their children, my sister and myself, to have a French education, so we had remained in France, under the care of my maternal grandparents. During the school year we were in boarding school: we both were good students, and we had won full scholarships in the state competitive examinations. We spent the holidays with my grandparents. Until he retired, in 1937, my grandfather had run a fairly big farm. He had four work-horses, twenty five to thirty heads of cattle, several pigs, two dozens of egg-laying hens. He grew wheat, buckwheat, barley, rye, oats, potatoes, beets, turnips, peas. He also had two apple orchards and fruit trees which gave cherries, pears and plums. After he retired, shortly before the war, my grandparents went to live in town.

In September 1939, in response to the invasion of Poland by Hitler, France and England, which were Poland's allies, declared war. At first, there was no big change in our everyday life. I went back to my school, the Brest lycée, where the only obvious changes were the black out and the presence of British soldiers in the streets. Most of the population did not seem to be deeply affected by what was happening: France was protected by the Maginot Line, the Germans appeared willing to remain behind their Siegfried Line, people thought things would continue like that for a long time, and did not worry. The German Blitzkrieg of June 1940 changed everything.

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Just before the first German troops reached Brittany, some of my school-mates managed to reach England. I planned to follow their example the very next day. Unfortunately, the German armored cars arrived before I could get to a fishing vessel which would have been willing to take me across the channel and, like everyone else, I had to get used to life under the thumb of Nazi Germany. At the beginning of October, classes resumed at the lycée.

School-mates who, like me, were preparing for the baccalaureate exams, or those, somewhat older, who were studying for entrance exams to engineering schools, were 16 to 20 year old. We all were for De Gaulle, which, at that time, led to no other action than tracing crosses of Lorraine with chalk on the city sidewalks and walls. The RAF often came to bomb the Navy Yard and the German ships in the harbor, and we sometimes stayed out of the bomb shelters in order to watch the tracers, the rockets, the searchlights and the flak shells exploding in mid-air: it was quite a show, better than fireworks. At the same time, it was not very prudent, and a friend had his cheek pierced by a piece of shrapnel from an exploding anti-aircraft shell dropping from the sky. Since the harbor was next to the city, many bombs fell on houses and buildings. In the Spring of 1941, the bombings became so frequent and so dangerous for civilians that our school was closed. I had an aunt who lived in Brest, where her husband worked at the Navy Yard. She left the city to seek refuge with her parents in Châteauneuf. The Gernans had
sent her husband to Hamburg where he had to work for the *Kriegsmarine*. Forced labor in Germany soon became quite common.

I continued my studies in Rennes, where I passed my final exams for the baccalaureate and then matriculated at the University to prepare a *licence de lettres* (the equivalent of an *M.Phil*.), taking the required courses: Latin, German, French Literature, English Language and Civilization, English Philology, English Literature. I also took courses in Italian, although it was not required for the degree, because I had always been interested in languages. We studied hard. There was little else to do anyway: life under German occupation did not give many opportunities for enjoyment. At an age where young men and women would normally go out in the evening, to concerts, dances and so on, this was impossible. Dances were forbidden, and because of the curfew instituted by the German authorities one could not go out in the evening. All we could do was listen to the radio. Many radio sets had been confiscated by the German authorities. We only had primitive sets made of headphones attached to a galene crystal and to an antenna (attaching it to a water pipe worked quite well). It required no electricity. We were thus able to receive broadcasts from England which were not scrambled by the Germans because these stations broadcast only music, mostly songs which were popular at the time. Many songs had to do with the war. I recall *Silver wings in the moonlight* (I think it was about a girl who waits for the return of her lover, an RAF flyer who has gone to battle the Luftwaffe), *The White Cliffs of Dover, We'll meet again*…. Later on, there would be American songs, *I'll walk alone*, for instance.

The Germans also had their songs. When they marched through town, they would mostly sing a Nazi marching song which I still remember, after so many years: *Ein Leuchten überstrahl der Land / Auf dem einst lagen die Ketten / Ein stark'r Führer was uns gesandt / Die Heimat, die Heimat zu retten*. … They also sang a traditional drinking song: *Ein Heller und ein Hatzen, die waren beide mein, ja mein, /Der Heller ward zu Wasser, der Hatzen ward zu Wein, ja Wein, / Der Heller ward zu Wasser, der Hatzen ward zu Wein. / Heidi heido heida* … They had another song, the celebrated *Lilly Marlen*: Hitler did not like it, they say, but Montgomery's soldiers who battled Rommel's *Afrika Korps* in Libya adopted it.

In the fall of 1942, the Allies had landed in North Africa. The Germans immediately invaded the South of France, which up till then had been under the control of the Vichy government of Marshall Pétain. It was then that I had my first contacts with the Résistance. An older class-mate, who, in 1939-1940, had had one year of military training (*PMS* [*Préparation Militaire Supérieure*]) the French equivalent of the ROTC), would take us by small groups in the countryside and taught us the basics: how to select a position, how to hide, how to move, how to observe, how to report, how to lead a patrol, how to prepare an ambush, etc…This would come in handy later on, when the Allies would land on the French shores, and we could take part in the fight for liberating French soil). In June 1943, I passed the first two exams required for the *licence* in English: English Philology, and English Language and Civilization.

I had my twentieth birthday in 1943, and was thus liable to be drafted for forced labor in Germany. All young Frenchmen did his utmost to escape that fate: they used forged ID papers which made them younger than they actually were, they hid on isolated farms if they knew peasants willing to take the risk, or went underground, if they had the right connections. I happened to know one of the members of the medical commission which determined whether a young man was healthy enough to do factory work in Germany. He had links with the Résistance, and he classified me as medically unfit because of some obscure ailment, heart
murmur or what not. Some of my class-mates got forged papers, others hid in the country. Still others attempted to cross the Spanish border. Some of them were betrayed to the Germans and sent to concentration camps in Germany. The ones who succeeded usually spent six or eight months in the Spanish prison camp of Miranda before they could reach Morocco where they joined the Free French Forces, or made it to England through Portugal. Others, like myself, were helped by the Résistance. With my phony medical affidavit, I was able to resume my studies at the University. I took my final exams for the licence at the end of May 1944 and immediately went back to my small native town. Ten days later came D-Day.

In Brittany, every small town had its Résistance group, organized and led by former officers and non-coms. Ours was commanded by a lieutenant, a career officer in the Colonial Infantry. I knew him well, since I had been in school with him, not in the same class however, since he was several years older. He had been quite active in the Résistance: he had even been arrested by the Vichy authorities and had spent a few months in jail before he was let go, for lack of evidence. Which did not keep him from resuming his Résistance work. In June 1944, everything was ready. We (i.e., local men of an age to fight) were ready to take up arms as soon as the call would come. The only problem was the lack of weapons, and London made us wait. Shortly after the landing, however, the first parachute drop took place, and we were given the word.. We met in an isolated farmhouse. We had been told to bring a blanket, a metal plate, a metal cup and a knife. We were not part of a regular armed force and we had no uniforms, which meant that, if caught by the Germans, we were not protected by the Geneva convention and were liable to be executed on the spot. With the weapons came a Jedburgh team: it was made up of an American OSS captain [Office of Strategic Services], a French lieutenant, and a British sergeant who served as a radio operator. The OSS captain and the British radio operator stayed with us. The French lieutenant was assigned to another Résistance group.

There were about 120 men in our group. We were divided into platoons of 24 men under the orders of non-coms. Each platoon was divided into three squads, and we were given weapons. I knew practically every member of my platoon. We all had gone to the same elementary school. A friend from my squad had a cousin who, a few days earlier, had been shot by the Germans. He was on a liaison mission when he was surprised by a German patrol. He tried to escape and was killed. At his funeral, in defiance of orders by the German authorities, a French flag was placed on his coffin. The pastor of the parish also was killed by the Germans a few days later: he had been taken hostage, tried to escape, and was shot. In our group, only a few were not local boys. Some had come to avoid being sent to forced labor in Germany. There was one German deserter who somehow had been accepted among us. In my platoon there was also a fireman from Paris and a non-com who came from the Navy. The plane which had dropped the weapons had brought Enfield rifles, Sten submachine guns, Browning automatic rifles, Colt automatic pistols, ammunition, hand grenades, and plastic explosive. There were a few bazookas and anti-tank rockets. The parachuted team also brought cash, so that we could pay farmers for the food they gave us.

The American captain, Bernard Knox, was actually British: he was a graduate of Cambridge University, and had emigrated to the United States after his marriage with an American woman. He had been recruited by the OSS, probably because of his linguistic ability: he spoke perfect French and Italian. After the war, I met him again in America, at Yale University, where I myself was studying for a doctorate in French literature. After the war, he had completed his graduate degree at Yale where he then taught Greek. This is where I met him,
again in the fall of 1947: I had just begun my graduate work in the Department of French, where I also taught part-time as an assistant. After the Liberation of France, Bernard Knox had been dropped behind enemy lines in Northern Italy, where he fought with the Italian partisans. In the Résistance, there were communists who did not want to be considered as members of the F.F.I. [Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur], or recognize the authority of their commander appointed by De Gaulle, General Koenig. They considered themselves members of the F.T.P. [Francs-Tireurs et Partisans], and recognized only the authority of the French Communist Party, but when their spokesman tried to be put in charge of political affairs for our group, our commanding officer sent him packing, and he no longer dared open his mouth.

The orders from London were quite simple: observe and report on the German troop movements in our district, sabotage bridges and railroads which the Germans might use to reach Normandy, and receive and distribute weapons dropped by parachute to other Résistance groups. We kept for ourselves the weapons from the first drop. They were covered with grease and had to be cleaned up: for this, we used whatever we could find, old rags and newspapers, tree leaves, grass…. During one night patrol, one of our squads, ten men in all, ran into a German patrol superior in numbers: no one survived the encounter. Two other men were captured by the Germans during a liaison mission, they were tortured, and then shot. In spite of the torture, they did not reveal our whereabouts, since no German troop came looking around the area where we were located at the time. Anyway, we never stayed more than a couple of days at the same place so as not to attract attention. We moved at night, through well-hidden paths.

The second parachute drop went well. Special teams had lighted the three bonfires marking the triangle where the men and the weapons were to come down with their parachutes. Other teams were ready to carry the containers to the horse-drawn carts which were to transport them. The hour had come, and as soon as the plane engine was heard, the fires were lit. Men and containers landed within the marked area, and the special teams dragged metal plates over the fires so that they would not remain visible a second longer than necessary. This time, it was not a Jedburgh team that came with the drop, but three French officers from De Gaulle's B.C.R.A. [Bureau Central de Renseignement et d’Action]. I knew two of them: I had been at school with them in Brest. Those two were assigned to other groups. The third one stayed with us.

Another weapon drop had been scheduled for a few days later. Everything was ready, the time had come, and as soon as the plane engine was heard, the fires were lit. This time, however, the plane dived toward the marked area which it raked with machine gun fire: it was a German fighter plane. The pilot made three passes over the area, and then left, presumably because he had run out of ammunition. The teams in charge of the fires had dragged metal plates over the fires and everybody had jumped into the ditches along the hedges which surrounded the area. Fortunately, the pilot had aimed at the triangle within the fires, where the containers were supposed to land, and there was nobody there, since no one was fool enough to stay at a spot where a container weighing close to a ton could land on him and squash him. We left quickly, thinking that the pilot would immediately inform German troops in the area of our location. If he did, they did not act on the information, since no German came looking around. After this, no other parachute drop was scheduled for our district.

We had learned that German submarine crews had come to rest in a neighboring castle. Our radio operator informed London of the fact. London scheduled a bombing raid on the castle. Unfortunately, the German crews were suddenly recalled to Brest during the night, London could not be informed of the fact in time to cancel the raid, so that the castle was bombed for nothing.
By the end of July, the Résistance, in the entire department of Finistère, had about three thousand armed men ready for action. Nearly half of them came from the area around my home town of Châteauneuf-du-Faou. Our group was part of the Battalion Normandie (200 men). Other battalions came from Saint-Goazec (Battalion Stalingrad, 200 men), Carhaix (Battalion La Tour d'Auvergne, 500 men), Scaër (200 men), Rosporden (Battalion Mercier, 400 men), and the Monts d'Arrée (Battalion Bir Hakeim, 200 men, and Battalion Giloux, 150 men). 3000 men were no match for the 25000 German troops stationed in the Finistère, the Kreta Korps, commanded by General Ramcke had two divisions, including a regiment of paratroopers, not to mention the Kriegsmarine personnel stationed in the port of Brest and the naval base of Lanvéoc-Poumic (the present location of the French Naval Academy). The paratroopers (Fallschirmjäger) were easy to recognize from a distance because they wore black uniforms, not green like other Wehrmacht troops. This discrepancy in numbers limited our activities to sabotage, gathering information about enemy movements, and receiving and distributing weapons sent by parachute drops. This, however, was about to change.

The Americans had managed to break through the German lines near Avranches, and General Patton had sent two combat commands to liberate Brittany. They were under the orders of General Middleton. At the beginning of August, the Germans were retreating before the American advance. There were among them Russians who had chosen to collaborate with the Nazis. They were commanded by a Russian turncoat, General Vlassov. The retreating troops had lost all discipline: as they retreated they set fires to houses along the road and killed the civilian occupants. One of our patrols captured two German paratroopers: they had in their pockets jewelry stolen from French civilians whom they had massacred. They were promptly tried, sentenced, and executed. We ourselves were subject to the same rules... One of our men (he did not belong to my group, but to another) had raped a farm girl. He was immediately tried, sentenced and executed. Our Résistance groups were totally dependent on the farming population for food and shelter, and the farmers had to be made aware that anything done to them would be severely punished at once.

On August 5, I was among the first from my group to meet the first Americans: two soldiers in a reconnaissance jeep, a driver and a machine-gunner, soon followed by other advance elements. A few miles further, they met with stiff German resistance: a couple of jeeps were destroyed by hand grenades, and one tank disabled by a panzerfaust. I saw a jeep returning with a wounded soldier: he was unconscious, he had been shot through the chest. We directed the driver to a doctor in a town nearby. The Americans did manage to push through, but they had lost eight men. One of our groups also managed to destroy a German light armored car, what they called a Spähwagen. By the end of that day, my hometown was completed liberated. 50 years later, in 1994, the town erected a monument commemorating the sacrifice of the eight Americans. During the next few days following our junction with the Americans, we combed through the countryside, picking up stray German soldiers who tried to reach their bases on the coast. Among the American soldiers who passed through Châteauneuf, there was a Breton, who had emigrated to the U.S., the nephew of a neighbor. He knew my parents, and he was able to write to them about us, the first news they had from us after four long years.

In order to celebrate the liberation of our town, a parade was held: our entire group marched along the main street, along with a detachment of American soldiers. There also was a mass of thanksgiving at the parish church. There was an argument about the flags to be displayed in church during the ceremony. Some felt that it would be a sin to display the Soviet flag beside
the French, American and British flags, since the Soviet Union was a godless country, but the argument was quickly settled: the Russians were fighting Hitler, and their flag would appear with the others. Our group had joined with another to form the Battalion Normandie, the lieutenant who commanded our group was promoted to captain and took command of the battalion.

At the end of August, the Germans still held the port of Brest and the naval base of Lanvéoc-Poumlmic, across the bay on the Crozon peninsula, and our commanding officers had placed their men at the disposal of General Middleton in order to liberate the remaining positions still in German hands. Through the OSS captain, it was arranged that the Americans would take care of Brest, while we would go after the naval base of Lanvéoc-Poumlmic. It was defended by a strongly fortified position on top of the Menez Hom, a high hill which rose 1000 feet above the surrounding countryside. The hillsides offered no cover, and they were defended by barbed wire and land mines, as well as by mortar and machine-gun fire. A frontal assault was impossible, but we surrounded the position and laid siege to it. During this operation, one of the BCRA officers who had been dropped by parachute was severely wounded. We lost a man who was killed by a land mine, and sustained a few more casualties, men wounded by shrapn from exploding mortar shells. It took a few days, but we managed to get hold of a 105mm gun, and a shell destroyed the electric generator on which the Germans depended for their communications. Having run out of food and water as well, they surrendered. For which our battalion was cited by the colonel who commanded the F.F.I. of Brittany. The naval base of Lanvéoc-Poumlmic surrendered a couple of days later. The German garrison of Brest held out against the Americans until mid-September, and we were quite proud at having accomplished our mission a good week before they accomplished theirs.

The Americans were in need of reinforcements, and after we had captured the German position of top of Menez Hom, they made an offer to our commanding officer: we could join one of their ranger regiments. Our captain was willing, but he first talked to us about it. We would receive brand new American uniforms, automatic Garand rifles far superior to the old Enfield rifles which we had, we would be given jeeps and trucks for transport instead of our own two feet, and we would receive American rations. The American GI's did not care much for these K rations, but after years of food shortages, we thought they were great: they contained cans of ham and cheese, preserves, instant coffee, sugar, cookies, cigarettes, and even (apparently, the Pentagon had thought of everything) condoms. We were all for joining the American rangers, and we thought we would soon be entering Germany side by side with Patton's troops. This was not to be.

It turned out that our close cooperation with General Middleton had political ramifications which we had not suspected. Unfortunately, De Gaulle and Roosevelt did not get along. Roosevelt thought that De Gaulle acted a bit too much like a would-be Napoleon. As to De Gaulle, he felt, and probably was not entirely wrong, that Roosevelt did not want France to have a government strong enough to block American influence in Europe, Africa and Asia. If the government of France remained weak, France would be unable to keep her colonies, and De Gaulle feared that Roosevelt would take advantage of this situation to steal these colonies. For Roosevelt, this would have been no theft. Roosevelt probably believed that in so doing, America would only give back their freedom to people who had been victims of French imperialism, and if these peoples, once freed, turned for help to America, it would have been only fair. Roosevelt had kept De Gaulle out of the Yalta meeting between the US, Britain, and the Soviet Union. He had also already attempted to unseat De Gaulle as head of the Free French government by
putting General Giraud in his place. Unfortunately for Roosevelt, Giraud was a poor choice, and De Gaulle had no problem in getting rid of him. Roosevelt had tried another tactic in order to keep De Gaulle from taking over the government of France after her liberation of France by having her liberated territory administered by an AMGOT (Allied Military Government). He even had money printed (scrip), which would be the only legal tender on the territory of France.

But De Gaulle was too quick for Roosevelt: he flew to Paris while the fighting to liberate the capital was still going on and simply assumed power. De Gaulle could count on the Free French Forces, General Leclerc's 2nd Armored Division which had been first to reach Paris, and of course the French Forces of the Interior which had effective control of the entire territory at the local level. The only opposition De Gaulle might have encountered would have come from the Communist Francs-Tireurs et Partisans, but he had been clever enough to get Stalin on his side. He had already sent a squadron of fighter pilots to the Soviet Union, and he had agreed to sign a Franco-Soviet pact. He had also agreed to take Communist ministers in his government (when the time came, however, he was prudent enough not to trust them with any important ministry). At any rate, given a choice between Roosevelt and De Gaulle, the French Communists would have backed De Gaulle. So De Gaulle had forestalled Roosevelt's plans. It was out of the question for Roosevelt to oppose De Gaulle openly: De Gaulle was extremely popular among the American public, for whom he was the incarnation of France, the traditional ally of the United States since the War of Independence. So Roosevelt went along with the fait accompli.

De Gaulle had sent an emissary to Brittany, Colonel Rémy, to make sure that his authority over the French Forces of the Interior was safeguarded. The colonel was not happy to hear that we had taken orders directly from an American general, but when he learned that we were ready to leave for the Eastern front as part of General Middleton's combat commands, he went ballistic. As a result, our battalion did not go to war side by side with American rangers. It became the First battalion of the newly reorganized 118th Infantry Regiment, 19th division. The Germans still occupied a few ports on the Atlantic coast of Brittany (Lorient, Saint-Nazaire), and of France (la Rochelle, Royan). For SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Forces), these ports were no longer strategically important: their German garrisons were not strong enough to do any damage. A few French battalions would be sufficient to keep them pinned down. So my battalion was sent to the Lorient front, without brand new uniforms, automatic rifles or K rations, needless to say. I did not go with them:

At the beginning of October, I was informed that I had been assigned to the next session of the Officer Candidate School of Cherchell, in Algeria, starting in December. De Gaulle needed a bigger army in a hurry, and there was a shortage of trained platoon leaders for the newly reconstituted regiments. In the French army, an officer candidate (aspirant) is neither a private, nor a non-com, nor an officer. He is, however, entitled to eat in the officers' mess, and to wear a gold braid with a red thread on each shoulder strap. The only responsibility I was entrusted with before going to report to the military headquarters in Paris was as follows. Our battalion had received several truckloads of used American uniforms which had been unloaded in a warehouse. Battle jackets, pants, shirts, boots, gaiters, caps and long coats were all mixed up on the floor. It was a mess. I had a detail of three men to straighten it out. I put them to work, matching the boots and gaiters by pairs, making separate piles for each item, and then sorting them out by sizes, small, medium and large. It took a couple of days to complete the work, but the detail had its reward: we picked for each one of us two of the nicest, cleanest, and best-fitting outfits.
I received my marching orders at the end of October, and left immediately for Paris. The railroad tracks which had been sabotaged by the Résistance were not all repaired yet, especially the bridges which had to be rebuilt, so that my trip took three days instead of the normal eight hours. In Paris, I reported to headquarters. All officer candidates had to be examined by a military commission: the army did not want anybody who might have collaborated with the German occupiers in its officer corps. Since there were several hundred candidates, this process took several weeks. In the meantime, we were housed in barracks near the Gare de l'Est. There I found quite a few school-mates from Brest and Rennes. While waiting to be questioned by the commission, we were at liberty. I visited museums and went to the theatre. The American army had taken over two movie theaters on the Champs Élysées: programs changed twice a week, and admission was free for soldiers in uniform. This is how I got to see all the new movie stars: Veronica Lake, Betty Grable, June Allyson, Deanna Durbin… The American army had also taken over the Grand Hôtel, near the Opéra. Every evening, there was dancing and at 10 p.m. they served snacks: you took a tray on which you piled up orange juice, real coffee, sandwiches, fruit salad, and chocolate chip cookies. After years of food shortages, this was paradise.

At military headquarters, I ran into a childhood friend from Châteauneuf. A couple of years earlier he had managed to cross into Spain, and eventually to reach England where he had joined the Free French Forces and become a paratrooper. At the time we met, he was a second lieutenant in the B.C.R.A., and on his way to India. He gave me news from another childhood friend who had also managed to cross into Spain. By the time he reached England, he was badly sick, and he died in a British hospital, probably from an infectious disease he had caught in the Spanish camp where he had been interned.

When I finally was called before the examining commission, I had no trouble: my commanding officer had given me a letter of recommendation, an affidavit stating that I had take part in the siege and capture of the naval base for which our battalion had been cited, and a copy of the citation. It is a pity that, at the time, I was not aware of the message which De Gaulle, had sent to General Koenig for the Breton F.F.I.:” Je vous prie d'exprimer aux unités des forces de l'intérieur qui opèrent en Bretagne la vive satisfaction du gouvernement pour la façon exemplaire dont elles mènent le combat, notamment depuis le 6 juin. La part que ces braves troupes et leurs chefs prennent à la grande bataille de la libération se révèle comme très efficace, en même temps que glorieuse. Honneur à eux.” The message had been sent on August 4, but did not reach our battalion until much later, too late to do me any good. As it was, however, it was not needed. In truth, I do not think that any of the candidates was rejected for collaborating with the Germans. A handful were rejected because, in the opinion of the commission, they had not taken any active part in the struggle for the liberation of France.

By mid-December, the work of the commission was finally completed, and we were sent on our way to North Africa. Because of the poor state of the French railroads, it took us nearly a week to reach the port of embarkation, Sète. We crossed the Mediterranean on a cargo ship. The weather was quite stormy, and the crossing took three days instead of one. We landed in Algiers, where army trucks were waiting to take us to Cherchell, a small town located on the shore between Algiers and Oran. The training would last six months.

We were housed in old army barracks, and we were issued one American wool dress uniform, two cotton outfits for everyday use, a French rifle with bayonet, a cartridge belt, a French steel helmet, a gas mask, and all the individual equipment we might need: compass, military map of the surrounding district, blanket, mess kit, digging tool…. The food was not bad,
couscous, vegetables, mutton, and local fruit, oranges, tangerines, figs or dates, according to the time of the year. All branches of the service were represented: infantry, armored cavalry, artillery, anti-aircraft, engineers, signals, transport, supply. I had been assigned to the infantry. The purpose of the training was simple: turn us into officers able to lead a platoon in combat, to teach soldiers how to progress without being seen or heard by the enemy, how to observe and to report what they had observed, how to recognize enemy and allied tanks and planes, how to handle all kinds of weapons: rifles, submachine guns, machine guns, mortars, anti-tank rockets, etc, those used by the enemy as well as those used by the Allies. We had to know what orders to give to our non-coms in every possible situation: fighting at night, in city streets, in a forest, on a landing beach…. Every day there was something new to learn: what to do if we encountered land mines, or got caught under fire from enemy artillery, tanks or planes… As if that was not enough, we always had to show up for morning inspection without a speck of dust on our boots, or a trace of rust on our rifles. It goes without saying that the beds had to be squared of, and the equipment on the shelves above the bed stored in perfect order.

All the training exercises were made with live ammunition, which could be dangerous. One guy was loading shells on his tank when a defective shell exploded and killed him. Another man was blinded by shrapnel from a mortar shell. One accident occurred close to me: our platoon was charging an enemy position, and the fellow next to me was getting ready to throw a hand grenade into a machine-gun nest when he stumbled and fell. The grenade exploded, and he lost his right hand. The weather, in January and February, was quite rainy, and we spend days marching in mud and training under the rain. In March, however, it got nice and warm enough to go swimming. Sunday was our only time off, and after mass we would head for the beach and lie in the sun. After April, however, the sun got too hot, and we preferred to lie in the shade of the cliffs.

We were so taken up by training that we had no time to keep up with news from the war, so that news of the German surrender came as a surprise. The war in Europe was over, but the Japanese were still fighting, and many of us expected to be sent to Indo-China. At the end of May, the final exams began. There were three parts. First, the candidate had to show that he could lead a platoon on the parade ground, which soon rang with all kinds of commands: “Garde à vous”, “A droite… droite”, “L'arme sur l'épaule… droite”, “En avant…marche”, “Tête … droite”, “Fixe”, “L’arme sur l’épaule, section… halte”, “Reposez… arme”, “A droite… droite”, “L'arme sur l’épaule…droite”, “Présentez…arme”, “Reposez…arme”, “Rompez les rangs”. This was the easy part. For the second part, we had to show that we could prepare a position for defense and make proper use of mortars and machine-guns. Finally, we had to lead a platoon in combat, send scouts, make the best use of the terrain, protect flanks and rear, etc… When the exams were over, we had earned our officer stripes, one silver bar which was placed on each shoulder straps for mounted cavalry and armor, one gold bar for all other branches of the service, and we received our assignments: mine was to the 24th Regiment, Tenth Infantry Division. Germany and Austria had been divided into four zones occupied by forces from France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States. France was to occupy Saarland, Rheinland, Pfalz, Württemberg, the territory of Baden, Vorarlberg and Tirol. My regiment was part of the occupying forces. At the end of June, army trucks took us from Cherchell to Algiers, where we embarked for Marseilles. The weather was ideal, and we reached Marseilles the next morning. In the afternoon, we took the train for Paris.

In the meantime, my two uncles had been repatriated from Germany, and my sister was
busy getting all the documents she needed to join our parents in America. This took quite a while. The mail was slow, the French passport office and the American consulate were swamped with applications, and crossing the Atlantic was nearly impossible, since all the big liners had been taken over by the army for transporting troops. My sister had to wait till the beginning of 1946 before she finally got all the required documents. She then had to wait some more until she could find passage.

From Paris, I went by train to Strasbourg, from where I was sent to Donaueschingen. It turned out my regiment was not there, and I had to return to Strasbourg, where I was told to report to the headquarters of the 10th division in Koblenz. At least I had been able to visit the Strasbourg cathedral, which was still half hidden by the sandbags which had been used to protect it from bombs, and to see the Danube, which, in Donaueschingen, was little more than a narrow stream.

From the divisional headquarters in Koblenz, I was sent to the regimental headquarters, in Simmern, from which I was sent to my battalion headquarters, in Oberwesel, on the bank of the Rhine. There were three companies in the battalion: one was quartered in Oberwesel, and the other two in Bacharach, Pfalzfeld and Lingerhahn. For most of the following months, I was used to train recruits and non-coms in these different companies. Life was not unpleasant for the occupying troops. The local girls, not to mention older women, had had to do without men for years; these had all been sent to fight in France, Greece, North Africa, Russia, Italy, and most of them had been either killed or sent to prison camps. So the girls had no make do with young French soldiers, who showed themselves quite eager to respond. The food was not bad, especially when eaten with the local wine. What the army provided was supplemented by smoked eels (a specialty of the region) and by meat from deer and boars which we hunted in the forests which had been the favorite hunting preserves of Nazi big shots like Göring. An important event at that time was De Gaulle's visit to the French forces of occupation. He stopped in Oberwesel, inspected the battalion, and shook hands with the officers, myself included, before moving on to Sankt-Goar, where a regiment of dragoons was quartered, and to Koblenz. A more pleasant event was the celebration of the Oktoberfest, in Bacharach.

In the late fall of 1945, I was put in charge of a platoon assigned to guard a detachment of German prisoners who were working to repair railroad tracks destroyed during the war near Bingerbrück. This assignment lasted only a few weeks. The prisoners ate the same army rations as our soldiers, but the German railroads gave us money to buy them extra food. One of the prisoners was from the area, and he knew the farmers, so we put him in our truck and sent him to buy whatever he could from them: since our driver, our truck, and our gasoline were used for this purpose, it was only fair that we took a share of whatever he brought back: I must admit that our soldiers wanted mostly the wine, the schnapps, and the sausages. After this assignment, my platoon rejoined the company, which was sent for a month to guard the prison camp near Bingerbrück from which our prisoners had been detached. It was a huge camp, entirely surrounded by a double barrier of barbed wire. There were towers in which two soldiers with a machine-gun mounted guard. They were relieved every two hours. Each of the company three platoons was on guard duty for 24 hours, and then was off for 48 hours. The weather was terribly cold, and I hated it, at night, when it was my turn to lead a squad of soldiers around the camp to relieve the men in the towers.

The prisoners were kept in the camp instead of being discharged at once because their military records had to be checked. A captain from Alsace was in charge of the checking. He
spoke perfect German, and he was mostly after SS who might have been guilty of war crimes. Each prisoner was interrogated. The captain looked at his military papers and made him take off his shirt to see whether he had his blood group tattooed under his armpit: this was standard practice among the SS. If the captain thought that the prisoner was suspect, he had him transferred to another camp for further investigation. The month I spent guarding that prison camp was most boring. The only pleasant thing I remember of that time is an evening spent in a night club in Bad Kreuznach, a city nearby, to which we had been invited by an officer stationed there. After that month of guard duty, I returned to Oberwesel.

We occasionally were called on to participate in divisional training exercises. It was a cold night in December, around 4 a.m., when I was awakened by the bugle call: I quickly got dressed, grabbed my pistol, and reported to the company office. Division had just launched a night exercise. Some bright colonel had imagined the following scenario: supposing a column of enemy armored cavalry had crossed the border of Thuringia and was rushing toward the bridges of Koblenz, Neuwied and Remagen, could we react in time to stop the enemy advance? The armored regiment quartered in Montabaur would take care of the Autobahn, near Ruppard. The dragoons of Sank-Goar would guard the Holbach road, and we would take the Heilbersheid road. We would have to occupy the heights of Reckenthal before the enemy arrived. It would be a race against time. Mortars, machine-guns and ammo were loaded on the trucks, the anti-tank squads were issued bazookas and rockets, and the cooks brought K rations, bread and hot coffee for the canteens. Fortunately, we were closer to the objective than the enemy, and our trucks were faster than their tanks, but the snow which had fallen during the night slowed us down. The drivers did their best, and by 7 a.m. we were in position. Mission accomplished. Headquarters would be happy, but we were not, especially since we had to wait till noon before new orders came: we would spend the rest of the day showing the flag, so to speak. We had no flag to show, it was just a question of driving through villages to show the locals who was boss. I had caught the flu, and I paid little attention to the roads we took. I believe we drove through Vallendar, Koblenz, followed the Mosel until Bursen, and rejoined Oberwesel through Machen, Dommershausen, Safershausen, Mussebach, Bellheim, Brannshorn, Lingerhahn and Damscheid. I remember stopping in some village where we had noticed an inn. It was just a large room with a long table and benches, but there was a big fire in the fire-place. The inn-keeper had only wine and schnapps. I ordered some hot water for my instant coffee and poured schnapps into it: this did me a world of good. When we got back to Oberwesel, I immediately reported to the infirmary. The doctor prescribed aspirin and three days’ rest. For three days, I did not leave my room: I ate what was left of my K rations and drank hot tea.

When I reported to the company office, on the 4th morning, I found out that I had been designated for ski training in the Vorarlberg. Why, I never understood. I had never been on skis, and there were officers in the battalion who were expert skiers. But in the army, trying to understand is a waste of time. So I reported to headquarters in Lindau, on the Bodensee, to wait for the truck that would take me to the Vorarlberg ski station. The weather was fine, and I took some pleasant walks along the lake. However, it was snowing in the mountains, and the roads were blocked for several days. Eventually, the ski training program was canceled, and I returned to my battalion, where I found I had been assigned to the company quartered in Pfalzfeld and Lingerhahn in order to train new recruits. This is where I got news from my sister: she had finally been able to find passage on a Swedish freighter, she had left Le Havre on Dec. 23, and reached Newark on Jan. 33 1946. There were only 10 passengers, all women, and all of them war
brides, except for my sister.

During all that time, I usually was free in the evening and on Sunday, but there was not much in the way of entertainment. I had bought some books: Rilke's *Duineser Elegien* and *Sonette an Orpheus*, and the complete poems of Hölderlin, as well as special issues of the journal *Fontaine* about modern American and English literature. I had an anthology of German literature from Lessing to Heine. I had also found some American paperbacks. I listened to radio broadcasts, mostly from the American Forces Network. I liked tunes like *In the mood*, *Smoke gets in your eyes*, *In my solitude*, *Gonna take a sentimental journey*, *Pardon me boy, is this the Chattanooga Choo Choo*. I also listened to German tunes like *Stern von Rio, du könntest mein Schicksal sein*, *Zum Abschied reich ich dir die Hände*, *Spiele, spiele, lieber Geiger, spiel ein Lied für mich...* Occasionally, I got a chance to see a German movie. The favorite actresses of the time were a brunette, Zarah Leander, and a blonde, Marika Rökk.

In February, I was informed that I had been appointed instructor for the next training program for the non-coms of the division, which would be held in the castle of Oranienstein, near Diez. There were seven instructors, and I knew four of them, who had been with me at Cherchell. What we did was very similar to what we had done there, except that we were teaching instead of learning. Toward the end of the program, in June, we were informed that the army would be making sharp cuts, that the 10th division would be reduced to a half-brigade, and each regiment in the division to a battalion. During the reorganization process, I was assigned to the half-brigade headquarters, in Neuwied, where I had nothing to do. I saw a couple of German movies, and visited the memorials of two French generals who fell there during the post-revolutionary wars (the Revolution of 1789), Hoche and Marceau.

Eventually, I was sent to the 24th battalion, quartered in Bad-Neuenahr and Ahrweiler. These two small towns are celebrated spas, with luxurious hotels, much similar to such French spas as Vittel or Vichy. There were only four officers, and there was very little to do since the batch of new recruits would not arrive until the Fall.: I was just marking time, waiting to be discharged at the end of the summer, after two full years in the regular army, so I spent my time at the pool, swimming in mineral water, or reading whatever books I could lay my hands on. Otherwise my only task was to escort trains full of discharged soldiers from Koblenz to Saarbrück. Some of these soldiers had celebrated their discharge a little early, and gotten drunk before boarding the train where some of them had behaved like vandals. The railroad company had not been pleased, and headquarters had decided that an officer and a squad of soldiers would escort the train from Koblenz to Saarbrück, where they would hand it over to another military escort from Saarbrück to Paris. Thus, two or three times a month, it was my turn. I boarded the train around six in the evening, accompanied by a sergeant and four men in full dress uniform, with white belt and white gaiters. I had my sidearm, and the sergeant and the four men carried submachine guns. We boarded the train at around 6 p.m., and as soon as the train left the station, I took the sergeant and two men with me and we went through the train, checking all the leave and discharge papers of the passengers, not really for the documents themselves, but rather to show that we were on board. Afterwards, the sergeant and I, accompanied by two men, took turns inspecting the train from one end to the other to see that everyone behaved. If one had not, we would simply have kicked him off the train at the nearest station and left him there to cool off until the next train would come by, 24 hours later. But it never happened.

Finally, at the end of September, I received my discharge papers. I immediately applied for a passport and an American visa. The French passport offices and the American consulate
were as swamped as ever with applications, and it took me as long as it had for my sister. In my home town, I met again with the childhood friend from the B.C.R.A. who had been sent to India. After some time spent training for jungle fighting, he had been dropped in Indo-China where he was betrayed by some natives who collaborated with the Japanese occupants. The Japanese military authorities tried him and sentenced him to be beheaded. Fortunately for him, the Americans dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japan surrendered. So my friend did not have his head lopped off by a samurai sword. He was freed, and sent back to France where he was discharged several months before me. His father was living in America, like my parents, my friend already had his visa, and he was scheduled to leave shortly. I had to wait till January 1947 to get passport and visa.

I must confess that I was a little surprised by the way in which the visa applications were handled at the American consulate. I had to swear that I was neither a drunkard nor a pimp, that I did not practice polygamy, and that my purpose in going to America was not to assassinate President Truman. I could not see the point of such oaths, since anybody who intended to commit murder would certainly not hesitate to lie about it. It was not until later that I came to understand that such oaths might in fact be extremely useful from a legal standpoint, since they would provide the foundation for perjury proceedings. I had to wait till mid-February before I finally was able to find passage aboard a Norwegian freighter. It left Le Havre on February 14, but due to the bad weather it took us nearly three weeks to reach New York. There were only eight passengers: two couples of displaced persons from Eastern Europe who had relatives in the US, a young French girl who, like myself, was going to join her family, and a young French woman who had married an American soldier. There was also a male war-bridegroom, a French sailor who, during the war, had spent several weeks in Canada where he had married a French Canadian girl. He had found it quicker to sail to New York, and from there to take the train for Montréal. The sea was so stormy that for three weeks I could eat only crackers and drink only tea: by the time I reached New York, I had lost at least ten pounds.

On March 4, we landed in Brooklyn, where my mother and my sister were waiting for me, and what a joyful reunion it was after such a long separation. Immigration and customs formalities did not take long, since there were only eight passengers. We shipped my trunk to Derby directly from customs. We then took a cab to Grand Central Station, where we boarded the train for Derby, CT. My father was home when we arrived, and we had tears in our eyes when we hugged. My parents' apartment occupied the entire second floor of a house: there were three bedrooms, one large living-room, one large dining-room, a kitchen, a bathroom, and an attic almost as big as the entire apartment for storage. My sister had spent a year studying English and taking some business courses, and she had just started working at a local bank.

Derby happens to be located less than ten miles from New Haven, and there was a bus every hour from early morning till midnight. I went to pay a visit to the chairman of the Department of French at Yale University, Professor Peyre. He was most welcoming. Yale, like most colleges and universities at that time, was overcrowded with students. All the returning G.I.'s who had been drafted right out of high school were now continuing with their education, and the Department of French was in dire need of teaching assistants. Professor Peyre thus arranged for me to be accepted as a doctoral candidate and teaching assistant in his Department. All I had to do was to prepare an application to the Dean's office with copies of my university diplomas, and ask two of my former professors at the University of Rennes to write letters of recommendation for me. For the doctorate in French literature, one needed to take three years of
study (24 one-semester courses in all), pass a qualifying examination, and write a doctoral dissertation, which usually took two additional years. I was given one and a half year of credit for the university work I had already done in France. There were four courses which were compulsory: two on French Philology (essentially, to study how Latin evolved into Old French), and two on literature in a Romance Language other than French: it could be Italian, Spanish, or Portuguese (I elected Italian). The remaining eight courses I had to take would be on different periods of French literature, from medieval epic poems to existentialist novels and plays.

A teaching assistant taught only part-time, but the salary was sufficient to live on, especially since I would be staying with my parents and could save on rent. Anyway, after being separated for so long, I had no wish to live by myself in a tiny student room at the graduate school. Classes started at the beginning of September. In the mean time, Professor Peyre suggested that I brush up on my Latin and my German, since proficiency in both languages was required: I was not concerned, since I had studied Latin for seven years, and I had become quite at home in German. He also suggested that I learn typing, which I would find useful for writing papers, and that I do as much reading as possible, works by and about French writers. My sister let me have the typewriter which she had used to learn, and I soon was able to type the notes I took from my reading. After Labor Day, I started at Yale. The teaching was rather easy: I taught one language course for beginners, and one grammar course for advanced language students, using handbooks which had been prepared by senior professors. I had passed the Latin and German examinations without any difficulty. During my first year at Yale, I took eight of the required courses. In my leisure time, I learned Spanish.

It was then that I ran into the OSS captain who had been with us in the Résistance. After we had captured the naval of Lanvéoc-Poulmic, he had been recalled by the OSS: for his work with us, the French government had awarded him the Croix de Guerre, and the American Army the Bronze Star. Later on, the OSS dropped him in Northern Italy, which was still occupied by the Germans, where he did with the Italian partisans the same kind of things which he had done with us. As soon as he had been discharged from the Army, he had returned to Yale where he had finished his doctoral thesis and where he had been appointed Assistant Professor of Greek. He soon left Yale to go to Washington, where he joined the Harvard Centre for Hellenic Studies and became a celebrated scholar, publishing numerous books and articles, and eventually assuming the direction of the Centre.

During my second year at Yale, I took the last four courses which were required, and I prepared for the qualifying examination which one had to pass prior to writing the doctoral dissertation. After this exam, I took a vacation, my first in two years: I went to Mexico City where I enrolled in the Summer School of the University and signed up for two language courses, and two courses in Spanish Literature. This I did for fun, since it gave me a chance to visit the country. When I returned to Yale at the end of August, I was appointed Instructor in French, and during the following two academic years I taught full-time while writing my doctoral thesis (my subject: the 19th century historian and essayist Ernest Renan).

In the meantime, my sister had left her job at the local bank and gone to New York where she took some advanced business courses and found a more rewarding position in the New York offices of a major airline. She worked there for several years, until she got married and had her first child. It took me two years to finish my thesis, and in the fall of 1951, I joined the Wellesley College faculty with the rank of Assistant Professor in French. This is where I spent my entire academic career, for many reasons, both personal and professional, although, along
the years, I received many offers to teach elsewhere. Wellesley College has been consistently ranked among the top five colleges in the country. It offers its faculty the freedom, the time, and the resources both for teaching and for research. Its campus is quite beautiful (it was designed by the celebrated Boston landscapist Olmstead), and the town of Wellesley is an excellent place for raising a family. Wellesley is close to Boston, the American city which the French people like best because of its cultural, historical and geographical interest. It is located near mountains (for skiing), beaches (for swimming), and rivers, lakes and the sea (for kayaking and sailing). For me, it had the added advantage of being within driving distance from my parents, in Connecticut, and of having direct flights to Paris. It is also close to Eastern Canada, from Ontario to Gaspe and Nova Scotia.

I had hoped that, after I retired, I could divide my time between America, France and Brittany. This dream, alas, did not come true: right at the time of my retirement I was hit simultaneously by cancer and a heart attack, and the ensuing health problems made it impossible for me to take long plane trips.