

In the name of history, let us forget the seal of secrecy”: Narratives of the French SAS

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“In the name of history, let us forget the seal of secrecy”: Narratives of the French SAS

As part of the preparation of the doctoral thesis entitled “The Special Air Service Brigade during World War II,” a series of interviews was conducted regarding the 3rd and 4th French SAS battalions. The Brigade, British in origin, was at the time of the war a commando parachute unit formed from two British regiments, two French battalions and a Belgian company. These men conducted secret missions essential to the overall operation, but often far from the main front. This unit as a research subject has been underused by historians. Certain missions or periods have been analysed¹, but no coherent, detailed vision is present in the current historiography. As written sources are numerous and diverse (371 boxes of archives), the testimonies gained through interviews were not indispensable *per se*; however, the scope of the thesis was enlarged to include the oral history in an effort to determine how this unit had appropriated its own history. The declarations are not included in the research as a “plus” but rather as a necessary element in the analysis of the subject.

The method used was developed following a seminar at the Sorbonne given by Florence Descamps² and based on much reading. With the goal of recording the “collective memory” of this group, the semi-directive interview seemed appropriate. A statistical questionnaire accompanied by a brief explanation of the thesis was sent to all members of the association. Those who responded favourably were then contacted for an oral testimony. The interview generally took place over one or two days, at the interviewee’s home, and was finalised in a one- to three-hour recording. For technical and financial reasons, the format is exclusively audio, and I was the sole interviewer. The SAS member knew that the value of this exercise lay in each participant’s experience. Thus the interview began with a personal introduction, parents’ profession, home, studies, etc., information already gathered in the written questions but which permitted the participants to tell their stories to the fullest extent possible. The first period concerned the outset of the war, “the strange war,” up until their enlistment in the SAS. The discourse is undirected and the questions served only to refocus the testimony. The second period concerned their service in the brigade: recruitment, training, daily life, and missions. The third and final period concerned life after the SAS.

The dispersion of the French SAS over all of the territory was an additional difficulty. At this time, twenty-seven subjects have been interviewed and their declarations recorded. The sample collected was determined by the willingness of the subjects to participate and the possibility of meeting them. The interviews cover four regions: the south-east, Paris and its surroundings, Brittany, and New Caledonia.

How does this population, whose bylaw was secrecy, manage its history and its collective memory? Why and under what conditions is the silence broken?

¹ KEMP Anthony, *S.A.S. at war: The Special Air Service Regiment 1941-1945*, Londres, Penguin group, 1991, 268 pages. Although this is a reference book on the SAS, the analysis is too succinct. The British units are better documented than the others are.

² DESCAMPS Florence, *L'historien, l'archiviste et le magnétophone. De la constitution de la source orale à son exploitation*, Paris, Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière, 2001, 864 pages.

I. THE DUTY OF MEMORY : FOR THE DEAD AND FOR HISTORY

The “men of duty”: Who are they?

The obligation or duty to remember is strong in those entrusted with responsibilities, imagined or real. These people are accustomed to questions and various interviews, all of which are an integral part of their functions.

The officers have been conditioned by their positions; they represent and are responsible for the men in their units. Their rank and their command influence their discourse³.

A second category is comprised of these “men of duty,” official VIPs, notably in political life.

The final category includes those involved in the SAS association who are essentially the keepers of memory⁴.

A/The official discourse

These “men of duty” maintain a discourse that is consistently positive and favourable to the French SAS. This positive discourse aids the association and, by consequence, its members. The official line contains no blanks or memory shortages; the participants are skilled in rhetoric and not a single “I don’t know” is allowed to slip in. From the beginning of their history in North Africa to the last campaign in Holland, all is masterfully executed, even if the interviewees are not the actual actors in the drama. The narration is composed of anecdotes drawn on the collective mythology and “war stories” experienced by a small few, which telling serves to embellish the unit as a whole. Exceptional and remarkable facts render the story more interesting and valiant, qualities not found in the daily routine. The discourse, based on real events, reworks the events by taking them out of their original context. Aside from the repetitive nature of the testimonies, they are especially reductive and frustrating. The person being interviewed loses his place in the narration and the interviewer must resist the format that the subjects impose at the time of the first interview. One aspect of this format is the use of “we” instead of “I.” The collective wins out over personal experience. In addition, the dead hold a prominent position. They become martyrs and the discourse serves to keep them alive. Two types of soldier come across in the SAS collective memory: the hero or emblematic figure who did not die in battle but who becomes a pillar of the unit⁵, and the martyr who represents sacrifice for his country⁶. Heroes tend to be officers and the martyrs, junior officers. These junior officers form the majority of the personnel, are more often exposed to combat, and represent an intermediate level that combines responsibility with action.

³ Interview of General LEBORGNE, 11/12/2003 at his home (Paris), 83 years old (1h15), 4th BIA.

⁴ FLAMAND Roger, President of the regional SAS association of South (3rd BIA), wrote *Paras de la France Libre*, Paris, Presses de la cité, 1976, 317 pages ; *Amherst. Les parachutistes de la France Libre 3e et 4e S.A.S. « Hollande 1945 »*, Saint Cloud, Atlante éditions, 1998, 207 pages ; *Qui ose gagne. Les paras de la France Libre 3e S.A.S.. Grande-Bretagne/ France, 1943-1944*, Vincennes, SHAT, 1998, 271 pages. The last two books are sponsored by the professional club and serve as bibliographical references.

⁵ The Bergé citadel in Bayonne honours General Georges BERGE, founder of the French Squadron SAS

⁶ ITURRIA Victor died 24/8/1944 in Blin, Brittany, dragged behind a German vehicle. As part of the original group, he had performed missions in the Middle East.

Two famous battles are often evoked: Saint Marcel for the Fourth and Sennecy for the Third. Every year, these two places host SAS commemoration services. It is curious to note, however, that these two events were SAS strategic errors that occasioned terrible losses.

B/ The association : Watchdog of the official record

All of the French SAS in the census over the last five years of research are members of the association, or have been in the past. There must surely be some “free units,” but they have thus cut all ties with the SAS community.

The association was created in 1946 on the initiative of Mr. Vacher in order to allow the comrades in arms to maintain contact with one another. This notion of solidarity and of fraternity was an integral part of the spirit of the SAS. The return to civil life was not easy for many and explains the rapid formation of the association.

The professional club has enlarged its field of action over the years: their control over the SAS heritage has become increasingly important. The association organises the commemorative events and edits a journal that includes stories of glory, an obituary column, and various announcements such as decorations and weddings, but its greatest function is to publish books retracing SAS history with the help of the Army Historical Service (SHAT)⁷. These works are the product of the SAS, who consulted military archives and recovered the testimonies and personnel documents of veterans. Their serious work reflects the conservative mindset of the association. Quite a few members present these books as “bibles” on the subject. The approval of official institutions like the editor, Army Historical Service (SHAT), reinforces this absolute secrecy. In 1979, the association also supervised the creation of an SAS museum⁸. Veterans were encouraged to deposit their personal effects there. Thus objects, documents, narratives, and daily life pass through the association. An examination of the working of the association reveals certain effects on the SAS memory: there has always been an ongoing quarrel between the two battalions. Like brother enemies, the Fourth reproaches the Third for its late adherence to Free France, and claims as a result to be the principal repository for the archives.

In the same way, a hierarchy has been established according to the chronology of enlistment⁹, the length of said enlistment, and the number of military campaigns and risks run.

The association can thus be seen as a shock wave: the closer one gets to the epicentre, the more the effects are visible. Regional associations have been created following the dispersion of the veterans around the French territory. These regional associations remain under the authority of the headquarters in Paris.

All those who finally undertake to research the French SAS must have the authority of the association, who can facilitate or considerably hinder the work.

C/ Confrontation or the influence of other accounts

⁷ See note 3 and CORTA Henri, *Qui ose gagne. Les parachutistes du 2e RCP (4e S.A.S.). France-Belgique (1943-1945)*, Vincennes, SHAT, 1997.

⁸ Museum of Breton resistance (Saint Marcel, Bretagne) and former of museum of La Grée

⁹ Paul KLEIN, who participated in the Middle East campaign, was recommended by Paul ROBINEAU. The British maintain this notion by calling the original SAS the *Originals*

The collective memory corresponds to a group and its common history. The SAS account runs up against other accounts that are more or less influential. Indeed, some SAS members belong to other groups.

First of all, the army's account is very present in the minds of SAS members who continue their military career after 1945¹⁰. This account upholds the Second World War for several reasons: it is often their first combat,¹¹ they considered themselves to be on the "right" side (those who were oppressed, occupied, and seeking liberty and justice) and were victorious. The wars of independence in the colonies, such as Vietnam and Algeria, were shameful wars that were lost, and the occupied became the occupiers.

Some French SAS members were enlisted in the French Free Force, especially members of the second battalion. There is a certain "Free French spirit"¹² which happens to be propagated in hindsight, and the SAS have inherited this viewpoint.

A legendary dichotomy claims that the Fourth are Gaullist and that the Third are Giraudist simply because the Third arrived from North Africa. This claim is too simplistic to rewrite the reality: the majority had no notion of political deals at the time.

If it was preferable to declare oneself Gaullist during the war, however, the SAS easily testify to their disagreement with General de Gaulle during his presidency (1958-1969). That is where the "pied noir" account comes in. The Third being largely composed of North Africans, the battalion suffered from the independence of Algeria. This war of independence (1954-1962), which is generally referred to as "events," traumatised those colonialists sent home to France from Algeria. The SAS members are both in agreement and in disagreement on the issue, reflecting the division that exists in France¹³. A part of the SAS joined the Secret Army Organisation, a revolutionary dissident army that fought to keep Algeria under the French¹⁴. Their defeat only aggravated the sense of injustice and it took a while for France to live up to this episode.

The Fourth Battalion is imbued with Breton accounts. Many members are from the Breton peninsula¹⁵ and this place was the site of their first mission in France at the time of the debarkation. Brittany has always been characterised by a strong nationalism. Nonetheless, relations between the SAS and Brittany are sometimes less than positive. Certain SAS members testify to their discontent in the face of a perceived lack of recognition on the part of the Bretons, who claim to have liberated themselves¹⁶.

Finally, Jewish and New Caledonian accounts have been noted in the testimonies. Neither group has a major presence or exerts an influence on the official discourse. One might be led to think that these minority collective memories are numerous: Corsican, Basque, or West Indian. Interview subjects display them when they talk about their origins. These accounts characterise cultures that have been stubbornly protected due to isolation (in the case of the islands) or history. Accounts from Brittany fall under this category, but carry more weight than those from the other groups I have just cited.

¹⁰ CARDINI Franco, *La culture de guerre*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992, 479 pages.

¹¹ A minority had enlisted in other units before becoming SAS, but the majority had their baptism by fire in the brigade. QUILLET Jacques was in the "strange war" in France in the 291st infantry regiment, but he criticises this period by inaction. Interview 10/5/2004 at his home (Villeneuve-lès-Avignon), 90 years old (1h30), 4th BIA.

¹² DEL RIO M., *Les Français Libres : du sacrifice à l'oubli*, Master's thesis in contemporary history under the direction of J.F. MURACCIOLE, Université Paul Valéry Montpellier III, 2003 p.73-79.

¹³ Interview of G. J., 12/12/2003 at his home, 82 years (2 hrs), 3rd BIA.

¹⁴ C.-J., who ruined a theretofore brilliant career. Certain SAS offer the war in Algeria and its trauma as an explanation : interview of G.J. : 1h53 and W.J., 10/6/2004 at his home, 83 years old (1 hr), 3rd BIA : 48min.

¹⁵ Interview of Jules LEPAGE, 7/6/2004 at his home (Erquy), 82 years old (40 min), 4th BIA.

¹⁶ Interview of C.G., 21/2/2001 at home, 79 years old, 4th BIA.

Curiously enough, it seems to be more demeaning for a Jewish person to admit an allegiance with the French Free Forces than to declare himself to be deported¹⁷. Deportation was often associated with the Jewish condition and the others are regarded as survivors.

II. THE RIGHT TO REMEMBER : FOR ONESELF AND ONE'S OWN

Who are they?

The majority of the subjects participate with the study for very personal reasons. Firstly, the interview is an exercise addressed to one person and which belongs to that person (according to the contract). The one-on-one talk between the SAS member and the interviewer allows for privacy, and the scientific aspect of a thesis is often reassuring¹⁸. The goal of the interview is announced as “getting to know the man before the unit.” The testimony is no longer a duty but a right that they can finally enjoy. The enthusiasm is more acute in members who have never before been interviewed¹⁹ and who are often astonished that their account can have any importance in the eyes of others. It is generally subordinate SAS members who compose this category. These people define their SAS history as “normal” and “ordinary.” Some veterans have decided to write their memoirs; an interview, if it is more structured, allows for less spontaneity.

A/ For oneself

The first and last stages of the interview require that the interviewee forget the collective in order to concentrate on his personal history. The intermediate stage, on his enlistment in the brigade, allows an alternative: the subject can choose the official discourse or his own experience, less “brilliant” but more sincere²⁰. Some replace doubts or uncertainty by responses straight from the official discourse. Thus an “I don’t know” in response to certain questions can indicate the subject’s honesty and/or the importance that he accords to his image of himself or the expectations of the interviewer.

“For oneself” does not necessarily reflect selfish and pretentious motivations. Nonetheless, the testimony remains a form of recognition. World War II is a well-studied and popular period that still fascinates, as evidenced by the recent spate of commemorative ceremonies. A subject had refused to be interviewed in 2000, but accepted four years later²¹. The interview was possible thanks to the town hall, which wanted to stage an exhibition for the sixtieth anniversary of the war. Thus the institution allows the witness some confidence, while the exposure gives him a certain notoriety. Current technology, along with the 60th-anniversary commemorations of the war, act as a favourable influence and are a help to the researcher.

SAS members have an added interest in telling their story; in their willingness to remember is the pleasure of seeing themselves again as they were at age twenty. The

¹⁷ Interview of Z. J., 16/12/2003 at his home, 86 years old (2 hours), 3rd BIA. He evoked anti-Semitism in the SAS units.

¹⁸ Not always, however; several subjects, including Mr. BRIDOUX, refused to be interviewed on the grounds that historians distort reality. The witnesses are often disappointed by the discrepancy between their view and history’s (letter of 7/7/2003).

¹⁹ Interview of NOEL Jacques, 10/12/2003 at his home (Vincennes), 80 years old (1h30), 3rd BIA.

²⁰ Interview of R.P., 9/12/2003 at his home, 79 years old (47min), 4th BIA. He combined in an amusing anecdote the official account and a personal one : wounded after the battle of Saint Marcel, he took refuge in a convent and had to disguise himself as a nun.

²¹ Interview of HARBULOT Robert, 19/8/2004 at his home (New Caledonia), 82 years old (2 hours), 4th BIA.

interview allows them to look at forgotten photos and see themselves at an age when they were young, handsome, strong, and carefree. But this journey in time is often accompanied by disillusionment; it brings out the contrast with their current old age, its potential solitude, and even the lack of regard today's society has for the elderly. The narrative also acts as an assessment of the person's life and thus brings him ever closer to his death, which often sparks the desire to record his memories before it is too late. One might think that a refusal to be interviewed, with a reason cited such as "it's in the past," mask an anxiety. Mr. Robineau admitted that he had had several nightmares following the interviews. For if the official discourse omits details of the executions carried out by the SAS, it certainly does not leave out a single one of those committed by the occupiers²². While the interview is by no means a psychiatric session, it can bring out declarations that have lain dormant, and perhaps even a hidden trauma²³.

This very personal process of remembering is fiercely controlled; personal objects such as pay books, insignia, various documents, and postcards are often kept as souvenirs that help shape and edit the memories²⁴.

B/ For (or by) one's own

Those around the witness participate directly or indirectly with the interview, thus one is confronted with a family history.

Some SAS married natives of the region where they performed their service²⁵. The wife generally attends the interview and testifies²⁶.

Another context presents itself when the family believes itself to be the owners of the account. The loved ones often facilitate the meetings and encourage the elder to accept the interview²⁷. Younger generations, accustomed to modern technology, are reassuring. The family encourages the ex-soldier to write his memoirs, which are part of their inheritance, even if they are not published²⁸. The other side of the coin can be a handicap, however. The family members are an interactive audience who, by their own admission, adopt the version told by the ex-SAS and encourage him to retell the amusing anecdotes²⁹. The discourse then becomes a series of anecdotes without a logical connection. The subject is inhibited by a knowing audience who sets itself up as a "judge." In the case of a deceased SAS member, the family decided to perpetuate his memory in their own way, through books³⁰, third-person

²² See III A and note 36.

²³ CROCQ Louis, *Traumatisme psychique de guerre*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1999.

²⁴ SAVOURNIN Henri, *Parachutiste avec la France combattante*, Paris, Barré Sayez, September 1985. For a more complete list, see: PASCUAL Fanny, *La Brigade du Special Air Service pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, DEA thesis in military history under the direction of Jules MAURIN, Université Paul Valéry Montpellier III, June 2002, p.34-41.

²⁵ For example Mrs. CHAMMING'S, married to an SAS whom she met when she was a liaison officer, and Mrs. SAVOURNIN, who lodged her future husband in Belgium.

²⁶ Mrs. CHAMMING'S published her memoirs as a liaison officer: *J'ai choisi la tempête*, Paris, France-Empire, 1961, 367 pages. As a result, during the interview, it was sometimes difficult to focus on her husband's actions as a radio SAS in Brittany.

²⁷ Mr. HARBULOT's son-in-law, who has a military career, identifies himself as an expert on the SAS epic. He organised the meeting, warned of the subject's deafness, and acted as co-interviewer. Any help he provided was mitigated by the fact that he frequently confined himself to confidences he had obtained earlier.

²⁸ LOICHOT Raoul, *Notre guerre*, unpublished manuscript, no date : his brother, SAS also, was killed in Holland on 8/4/45.

²⁹ Interview of DEMAISON Henri, 17/12/2003 at his home (Vésinet), 83 years old (35 min), 4th BIA. His wife and daughter attended the interview and participated in the responses.

³⁰ FAUQUET Solange, *Vers d'autres cieux, à d'autres amours : Philippe Fauquet, 1921-1944*, Paris, édition d'auteur, 1994, 191 pages. Philippe's sister decided to collect documents (letters, notes, maps...), slid them into a biography about one of the first Frenchmen enlisted in the SAS in the Middle East.

accounts³¹, or by standing in as a representative during various ceremonies³². In this particular case, the term “loved ones” can be used in its widest sense: enthusiasts (whether already friends of the family or recently become so) take charge of maintaining their memory³³.

It is rare for children to take interest in their fathers’ past lives—a consequence of May 1968? – unless they lived it a bit. It is the grandchildren who are generally more curious.

This interest on the part of loved ones can make up for the difference between the situation of the French SAS and their British counterparts. While the SAS in the UK are often too much in the limelight, the French SAS are unknown in their own country. Few people know that the brigade included French and Belgians. Moreover, the name « Special Air Service » has not survived in France. The disappearance of the title contributed to the slide into oblivion.

III. THE OBLIGATION AND/OR INTERDICTION TO REMEMBER

The dissidents and the invisible ones: who are they?

These SAS can be defined as “superlatives” in that they display in exaggeration characteristics shared by all SAS members. There is no solidarity among members of this group and each one is isolated in his own discourse.

This fringe group has two faces: the “big mouths” and the “invisible ones.” The first category openly contradicts the official discourse while the second category is totally absent.

In all of these cases, the veterans prove by their existence and their behaviour that the secret has not been completely broken.

A/ How and why are they “big mouths”?

The main reasons one can cite are trauma and disappointment combined with a sense of injustice. Naturally, it is simplistic to reduce behaviour to these causes. The marginal discourse is often accusatory and becomes negative in reaction to the official discourse. Nonetheless, some SAS members react differently from a sense of shame. Mr. Hourdin’s admission to communist obedience during the war shows a certain unease³⁴. To be a communist today no longer carries the stigma that it did during the Cold War, thus the unease of the SAS is anachronistic. The dissidents bring more to bear on this memory. These are witnesses who are certainly more confident (or rebellious?) and who adopt a “big mouth” strategy³⁵. During a visit to the museum at Saint Marcel, an interview subject explained the notches on his SAS knife that was on display. Each one represented an enemy killed by this weapon. As the SAS were commandos, this anecdote is not surprising to researchers. However, the official, sanitised discourse controls memories such as this one. The subjects are generally ill at ease in talking about the capture of prisoners, since the unit was under orders to take no prisoners³⁶. As a result, the SAS either disobeyed orders or executed all prisoners.

³¹ Most often, widows who are still active in the professional club.

³² The nephew of SAS Paul MARIENNE (4th BIA) was the guest of honour at the June 2004 commemorations in Brittany..

³³ The widow PEINTRE told her dead husband’s story to an enthusiast: Monsieur DURIEU Philippe.

³⁴ Interview of HOURDIN Roger, 6/6/2004 in a restaurant in Vannes (40 min), 4th BIA. Similarly, Mr. C.N. talks of his friend VACHER’s convictions : interview of C.N., 21/7/2003 at his home, 81 years old (2h15), 4th BIA.

³⁵ Interview of G. J., 12/12/2003, Op. cit.

³⁶ The SAS learned to kill silently and had orders to take no prisoners. Mr. PAPAZOW, during the museum visit, explained shyly that the notches on his knife represented the number of people killed with that knife. Interview de M.L., 7/6/2004 at his home, 79 years old (1h35), 4th BIA, corroborates this information without

For what reasons, then, do these facts come to light? Perhaps some disappointed members seek more recognition. The majority, however, defend themselves and claim that if they were not decorated, it is because they did not seek to be. Others, on the edge of settling personal accounts, speak in the name of “truth” and “justice.” It would be presumptuous and certainly impossible to judge the conscience of these subjects and claim to know their real motivations.

The official account, as given by the association and these keepers of memory, reacts to these contradictions, as might be expected. Mr. JACIR accepted an interview by the Air Force Historical Service (SHAA) as part of their project on the SAS and FFF³⁷. The club did not approve his testimony. In response to this, other veterans accepted interviews with the oral history division of the SHAA. One of these interviews deviated from the official account without the approval of the association when an SAS member told of the murder of a comrade by another SAS member. As the accused died in combat in Holland, the SHAA decided not to release this information. At this time, the association has never dismissed a member or refused membership to anyone. Yet it is a delicate matter to control these men, who are often just waiting for someone to whom to tell their story. Thus the marginal characters are treated as “crazy,” “senile,” “jealous,” or “bitter,” reasons which explain their tendency to lie and which isolate them further.

Finally, some silences are more telling than a long monologue. Remaining silent (or feigning ignorance) is a classic defence tactic to avoid embarrassing subjects³⁸.

B/ For the invisible ones, silence is memory

For the dead who participated in this history, silence is natural. Others have chosen this silence. They are the missing and untraceable. In this paragraph, more than elsewhere in this paper, we can only offer weak hypotheses. Indeed, those who are missing have never belonged to the association. As they have been absent since the war, it would be necessary to conduct detailed research to find them, starting with the names in all of the archives. There have been attempts, but the magnitude of the task, sixty years later, is greater than the available means. This project asked veterans if they had contact information for others, but not a single person not belonging to the association was ever retraced. The natural conclusion is that either the members respect the silence of those absent, or those who went missing have ceased all contact with their former comrades in arms. Even some SAS who are still in the association have decided to move on.

Conclusion

It is difficult to draw conclusions when the sample of veterans is still small, sixty years have passed, and the oral history insists on a measure of humility. The witnesses present several of these characteristics: duty, the right to memory, and marginality. To categorise them would be blasphemy. What makes the exercise so complex and the analysis so relevant is the importance of each aspect.

giving more information. A contrario the official discourse details the conditions under which MARIENNE died, killed by the militia.

³⁷ Interview number 300, JACIR Djamil, sergeant in the 4th BIA SAS, 30/06/1982 in Paris (2 hours). Ten SAS gave interviews afterwards.

³⁸ More precise questions are often asked at the end of the narrative. At times the answers are not recorded by the microphone, sometimes even never. LE CITOL Guy chose to grimace and repeat « because » when he did not wish to answer : Interview 3/6/2004 at his home (Pont Scorff), 80 years old (1h35), 4th BIA.

The accounts from veterans allows the researcher to complement or to add detail to written sources, but also to record the effects of time and the appropriation of their story.

Nonetheless, at the time of the commemorations in June 2004, the French SAS still had the sense of being history's forgotten players³⁹.

Two oral campaigns have been planned, one with the veterans of the British SAS and the other with the Belgian ones. At the finish, one of the major interests will be the comparison of these three entities.

What will be the influence of the national culture? What will they have in common sixty years later?

³⁹ The ceremonies and officials were in Normandy.