

**CAPITAINE**

**BAPTISTE**

SOE Wireless  
Operator  
and Maquis  
Leader



# **Capitaine Baptiste**

*SOE wireless operator and Maquis leader*

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*To the men and women of  
the French Resistance*



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# Introduction

## *Maquis Louis – Capitaine Baptiste’s Story*

THESE ARE my father’s memories of his wartime experience as a member of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) parachuted into occupied France in early 1944. They were written up thirty years after the event, between the mid 1970s and the mid 1990s, without the benefit of notes or access to official SOE files, which were not then open to public access. The memoirs are necessarily subjective and reflect his own personal outlook and personality, and indeed the manners and views of the years in which he grew up. I have not tried to edit his memories, because I think they give an authentic and fascinating insight into one person’s involvement in an extraordinary part of recent European history. He did not seek out that involvement – since my father was by no means an adventurer or a military man by nature. But he accepted involvement from a sense of personal and family duty.

He was born in 1916 in Dunfermline, Scotland, to a Scottish father and French mother. Thomas MacKenzie, his father, was a teacher of French at Dunfermline High School for nearly half a century, who as a young man would take himself off in the summer holidays to France to improve his French. In 1905 he took a course in Tours and while there, cycling into the countryside north of the city, he met my grandmother, Yvonne Bouttier, in the small village of Jupilles in the Forêt de Bercy. A year later they married and he took her back to Dunfermline.

My grandfather was by all accounts rather strait-laced and old-fashioned, but my grandmother’s warm and emotional nature made for a loving and close-knit family for my father and his younger brother and sister. Bilingual at home, the family spent many long summer holidays in France staying with Yvonne’s married older sister Germaine in Château-du-Loir. For some years her younger sister Marguerite (Gogo) also lived with the

family in Scotland. As Gogo spoke little English the children were forced to speak French.

My grandfather was an accomplished pianist and the three children were brought up playing musical instruments, in public and for family friends. They were also all rather bookish; my father went from Dunfermline High School to Edinburgh University in 1936 to study French and German. As part of his university studies he spent time in 1938 in Paris and then some months living with a *Junker* family in Prussia tutoring them in English. The eldest son of the family was already an officer in the *Wehrmacht* and others of the children were in the Hitler Youth. This no doubt gave my father some insight into the contemporary national psyche and an idea of where Germany was then heading.

When war came, and after the completion of his degree my father enlisted in the Royal Artillery in May 1940. He spent a number of months serving as a motorcycle despatch rider and in the Educational Corps.

In 1942 it was decided to establish an organisation to foster resistance to the Nazi occupation in mainland Europe. Winston Churchill called for such an organisation 'to set Europe ablaze' against the Nazis' occupation. This was the Special Operations Executive (SOE). My father's half-French background eventually came to the attention of the recruitment officers in the French section of SOE – F Section – who were trawling through the staff records for service personnel with French language skills and the potential to pass off as French men or women. They were to be sent to France to set up resistance groups or to act as radio operators to ensure communications with support and command in London.

My father thus joined SOE in May 1943 and underwent months of training to become an 'agent in the field', including training in physical endurance, sabotage, unarmed combat and parachute jumping – as well as specific training in Morse code and wireless telegraphy once it had been decided by his superiors that he was to be a wireless operator rather than a Maquis organiser. After all this training was completed and following evaluation of his

performance and capabilities, he was deemed ready for deployment by early 1944 and allocated to the GONDOLIER network covering the Department of the Nièvre in the Morvan region of central France, approximately 200 miles south-east of Paris.

The head of the GONDOLIER network was Paul Sarrette, a young Frenchman several years younger than my father, whom he met while they were both undergoing training and who got on well with each other. Paul had already been involved in resistance work in Lyons and the south of France before leaving via Spain for England. There he was recruited by SOE in May 1943. He was sent back into France, parachuting near Montbéliard in eastern France on the night of 20/21 December 1943, with instructions to set up a Maquis in the southern Morvan in preparation for the Allied landings, which were to take place at an unspecified date in the future. His *nom de guerre* for use in the field was 'Louis' and this was the name given to the Maquis he set up over the following months, the Maquis LOUIS.

Within SOE my father was given the (unreasonably unflattering) operational pseudonym MISOGYNIST, along with a French identity and documentation as Marcel Yves Chenard. His own *nom de guerre* for use in the field was 'Baptiste'. He was ready to go. On the ground, without a wireless operator or means of direct contact with SOE, Louis was hampered and desperate for Baptiste to join him.

I will let my father tell the story in his own words in Part One of this book. But I believe it is important and interesting to add, in Part Two, some of the background which was not available to my father when he wrote his memoir and which helps both to fill out his story as well as give it the necessary context.

K. J. A. MacKenzie  
February 2021



Part 1:  
Maquis Louis –  
Baptiste's Story



# Foreword

**F**IFTY-ONE years will have elapsed on the 18th of March 1995 since I landed by parachute in the foothills of the Pyrenees in southern France. That momentous day was doubly significant for me; it was my father's birthday, and it was my first successful operational landing in France. I had been sent to assist a section of the French Resistance in their struggle against the common enemy – the Nazi invader. My reasons for putting pen to paper and recording the events of those sad yet challenging times are threefold.

First and foremost, I would like to place on record, and keep ever alive the memory of the brave young Frenchmen and Frenchwomen who gave their lives to free their country from the tyranny and oppression of Nazi rule.

The second reason is to recall the loyal and unswerving assistance given to our Resistance group throughout the campaign by a very considerable proportion of the French population. It is true that not every Frenchman nor every Frenchwoman actively participated in the Resistance movement – many nowadays would have us believe they did. Can one honestly blame fathers and mothers of families hesitating to embark on joining the Resistance movement when the price paid for discovery inevitably meant swift and brutal retaliation by the German occupying forces? Those families who did participate and were caught doing so were rarely lucky enough to reunite as an unbroken entity at the conclusion of the war. Parents were often sent to different camps if not immediately tortured and executed. Their children usually found themselves separated and being cared for and growing up in different families. One telling factor and one that proves beyond doubt where the general sympathies of the local population lay is that neither the French officer who was the leader of the group, nor myself, his deputy, were ever betrayed. True, our security was reasonably sound, but out of some nineteen hundred resistance fighters who finally joined us, and a very large rural population, no individual ever betrayed either his fellow men – or what was equally

important to the survival of our group – details of our camp layout and our strength and whereabouts. Had anyone done so, it is more than likely I would not at this moment be writing this record of our activities in war-torn France.

The third reason and, in my opinion, a very important one, is to place on record the incalculable and unstinting assistance given to the French Resistance by the British fighting services and by individual British men and women. R.A.F. pilots and their crews and personnel of the Royal Navy ran immense risks ensuring the safe delivery of men and women into enemy occupied territory and recuperating individuals returning to the U.K. after completing a mission in the field. These same service personnel were responsible for the delivery of essential arms and supplies without which no resistance movement could hope to survive.

One may well ask why it has taken fifty-one years to set pen to paper. As time passes by at an inexorable pace, I have realised that with the passage of each year, wide gaps have appeared in our ranks. Many of our oldest and most loved friends are no longer with us. It occurred to me that if I failed to place on record the growth and deeds of our particular Maquis in the Morvan, the history of the Resistance movement in this region of France would be incomplete. Hence this record of my experiences in the region which among other things has given to the world the famous Charolais breed of cattle.

The events of these months spent in war-stricken France have remained clearly and indelibly engraved on my memory. While writing this account I experienced anew the whole gamut of feelings experienced in the past – suspense and frustration, joy and sadness, apprehension and confidence, exhilaration and despondency. In the end, it was a feeling of hope that took precedence over all these other feelings, hope for a better and less callous world. Fifty-one years after these events, one may well ask oneself, has any real progress been made towards achieving this aim?

*Kenneth Y.M. MacKenzie*  
*March 1995*



# Chapter 1

## *Preparation for the Mission and Landing in France*

I WILL refrain from going into details of how I was recruited and trained as information on this subject is already available in several books. For those who would like to have more details on recruiting and training of agents, I would refer them to Colonel Maurice J. Buckmaster's books entitled *Specially Employed* and *They Fought Alone*. In Chapter III of the latter book, one will find most of the relevant information on the subject.

Suffice it to say I was first commissioned as a 2nd Lieut. in the Royal Artillery, soon after and while still at O.C.T.U. (Officer Cadet Training Unit), volunteered to attend further courses on a variety of subjects to enable me to become an agent in the field. I spent one entire year in specialised military training, followed by a six-month course in wireless telegraphy, as I had accepted to become first and foremost a wireless operator in enemy occupied territory. By the time I entered France, in early 1944, I am given to understand that the average length of life of an operator was around three months. German counter-measures had by then been perfected and it was merely a question of time before the enemy network closed in onto the lone wireless operator. Like an octopus reaching out with its tentacles, the German counter-espionage claimed many a victim. Of seventeen colleagues who trained with me, I was one of only three who lived to return to Britain after our missions.

My training was completed towards the end of January 1944 and I was all set for the operational jump by parachute into occupied France. For six solid weeks I reported to the office in London, only to be told 'No, old man, nothing doing today'. Flying conditions were not proving suitable for the operation. Finally, one day in mid-February, it was decided that conditions were reasonable and

the phase of the moon suitable for a drop into France. After thoroughly checking with Vera Atkins, the Squadron Officer in London, that all my equipment, clothing and false identity documents were in order, I was ushered into the presence of our Commanding Officer, Colonel Buckmaster – who first of all congratulated me on completing the somewhat arduous courses, and informed me in his usual friendly, debonair manner that my mission was first to contact Louis in the field. Louis, the organiser of our Resistance group had attended the same initial course as I had and I considered myself lucky to be called upon to work with him as his second-in-command in the field. The Colonel continued ‘Then, together, you will set about coordinating, organising and helping the local Resistance. Just one point – remember, when you are over there, no politics; that is all. The very best of luck.’ The reference to participating in local politics was certainly not required in my case, although I appreciated how important it was to hold oneself strictly aloof from all politics once you were in France. As it turned out, the Maquis force of fighting men Louis and I built up represented all shades of opinion, from the extreme left – we even had two communists who were among our finest and bravest of soldiers – to several young men with aristocratic backgrounds.

Before finally dropping by parachute in the foothills of the Pyrenees, I made no less than four attempts. The first two attempts ended at the airfield somewhere in England where the R.A.F. decided that weather conditions had suddenly changed for the worse. More progress was made on the third attempt as I climbed into the aircraft, a Halifax bomber, and we took off for the South of France. The plane had a load of containers full of arms and equipment for the Toulouse Resistance group and I was requested by the jovial R.A.F. sergeant who was the ‘despatcher’ of human beings and materials through the round hole in the floor of the Halifax, to sit in the centre of the plane. The pilot flew the plane at a considerable height so as to avoid two anti-aircraft belts of fire stretched one across northern France and another over the Loire Valley over Orléans. Every now and then the plane would give a shudder and seemed to hiccup in mid-air as the result of the flak shell bursting perilously near. I myself was seated all trussed up in

my jumping kit in between the plane's two spare fuel tanks. I shudder to think what would have happened to me if the plane received a direct hit in this area of the Halifax's fuselage. We wound our way towards the Pyrenean foothills and once we arrived over the pre-arranged dropping point, we were unable to make contact with the Resistance group below. Either the group had been unable to wait on the ground owing to enemy troop movements in the area or they had possibly not received the message sent over the B.B.C. telling them to be ready to receive us. After making two or three runs over the area, the pilot decided to return to England. Just imagine my feeling of utter frustration and despondency. I was keyed up, ready for the operational jump when I was told 'nothing doing, back to England'! I even suggested that I was willing to jump blind and make my way to the rendezvous in Toulouse as I had obtained the times of trains for this area of France. The pilot was adamant, he was in sole charge of the plane and I was to return on the plane to England. Reluctantly, I had to accede to his order.

The return journey was uneventful except for a further shaking over the two anti-aircraft barriers further north and the frightful weather conditions that had developed in such a short few hours, to buffet the crew and myself all over the interior of the plane. We seemed to finally descend into England by shattering steps or rather consecutive drops until we reached the airfield. To add to my agony – as I was ill without being physically sick – the Halifax bomber's wheels suddenly jammed and the pilot had to complete two more sweeps around the airfield before the wheels were finally lowered. The whole journey had been thoroughly frustrating, and tired and weary, I retired for a well-earned rest. When I woke up next morning, I still had the buzzing sound of the plane's engines in my head and I was still feeling ill. I was glad that by lunchtime I had recovered sufficiently to partake of a pleasant and welcome meal.

The fourth attempt was successful – we finally managed to fly the 800-odd miles and make contact with the Toulouse Resistance group. This attempt was indeed successful, considering what might have happened. In these operational jumps incidentally, one rarely worried about the jump itself, the big worry was what was awaiting the parachutist down below. Was it the real Resistance or the