

# The story of Gaston, a resistant child

In World War II, France was occupied by Germans. To fight the opponents, the population organised a network of resistance. Gaston Picard was a daring child. He went into the French Resistance. We have interviewed him now aged 96 years old and this is his testimony.

## How was your childhood before your coming into the Resistance ?

I was born in 1926 in the west of France, in Morbihan. I lived with my parents in the grand-parents's house. Every day, we listened to the BBC at 8:15 p.m. I remember the radio set being hidden in the cellar in a briefcase. Even if Germans asked us to bring back the radio set to the police station, we didn't do that. We took the risk to be arrested or killed. We were in secrecy. My parents were opposed to the Vichy Regime and they rejected the figure of Marshal Pétain.

## How did you start your action into the underground movement ?

On June 18th 1940, like everyday, my parents and I were listening to the BBC radio and on that day we heard General de Gaulle's appeal. I remember him saying : "I, General de



SOE agents with a Maquis group near Savournon, H

\* SOE : Special Operation Executive

invite the officers and the French soldiers who are located in British territory or who would come there, with their weapons or without their weapons, I invite the engineers and the special workers of armament industries who are located in British territory or who would come there, to put themselves in contact with me. Whatever happens, the flame of the French resistance must not be extinguished and will not be extinguished". That's why my father decided to leave the house and go to London by boat.

After that, I decided to follow my father's way and I joined the resistance. In the beginning, I sold, on the village place, flower bunches in which there were coded messages which were concealed. Then, I handed out leaflets in my village to oppose Vichy Regime. At 17 years old, I and some resistance friends sabotaged a train line and I made a warehouse blow up. At night, we cut network cables. We had to be discrete and my family kept the secret.

## How did you get into the "maquis" and what did you do ?

In France, at 18 years old, we had to work in Germany. In 1944, I was 18 and I didn't want to join the STO. (= service du travail obligatoire / compulsory work service) To make my family and my father proud, I joined the "maquis", with my friend Elliott. The "maquis" was a type of bush in Southern France which became a symbol for the different hiding places for the resistance. We went into the countryside, in a forest. In my group, there were 20 members who were very united. We were equipped with guns, sub-machine guns and explosives and with that we fought opponents. Elliott and I were responsible for setting up defensive systems and to do armed conflict. Into the organisation, we rebelled against the Vichy Regime and the collaboration.

## Which were the risks ?

We operated in secrecy because the Milice and the Gestapo tracked us. This was a dangerous action. We risked to be arrested and sent to jail. If the Gestapo found us, we were hit or killed. In jail, we risked the death penalty. In 1945, in a mission, we went and destroyed an opponents's camp but the Gestapo was waiting for us.



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I managed to escape from the Gestapo but Elliott couldn't leave. He was arrested and I never saw him again.

## How was the victory and the liberation ?

On June 4th 1944, the members of "maquis" and I went to Normandy to help the liberation operation which was about to start. When we arrived in Normandy, our mission was to blow up bridges.

We did that to put a stop to Germans and slow down the opponents. Thanks to us, the landing was possible. After that I went back into my village and on 6th June, I heard the landing had succeeded. I was really proud when my father came back from Great-Britain and when I told him about my action. At the end of 1945, I received a French military medal : " La Croix de Guerre". I was 19 and that was the end of the war.