

FRENCH AIRBORNE TROOPS IN 1935 – 1940

In 1935 an airborne center is created by capitaine Geille on Avignon-Pujaut. The first French airborne troops were called "infanterie de l'air" and officially created on 1st April 1937, after a decision taken on October 20, 1936. Two "Groupes de l'Infanterie de l'Air" (GIA.) were formed (601st in Reims and 602nd in Baraki in Algeria).

Each group is composed of :

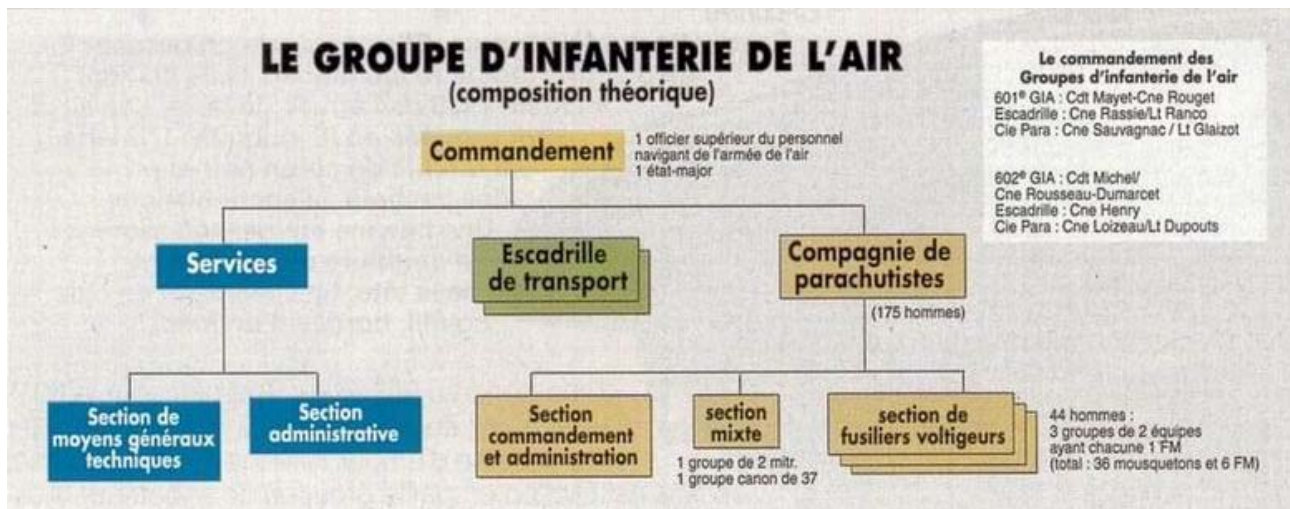
- one HQ
- one transport aircraft squadron
- one airborne infantry company (= CIA = Compagnie d'Infanterie de l'Air) : 175 men organized in 3 platoons + 1 support platoon (with 2 37mm TR infantry guns and 2 Hotchkiss Mle1914 HMGs).

Groupe de l'infanterie de l'air 601 (1937)

- commander : commandant Mayet
- commander of the infantry company : capitaine Sauvagnac assisted by lieutenant Glaizot (the lieutenants in the squads are Le Bourhis, Mayer, Audebert, Lespina, Fournier and Foucault)

Groupe de l'infanterie de l'air 602 (1937)

- commander : commandant Michel
- commander of the infantry company : capitaine Loizeau assisted by lieutenant Dupouts (the lieutenants in the squads are Fleury, Morel, Chevalier, Lemaître, Lemire and Bastouil)



Each 12-men squad is armed with Mousqueton Berthier Mle1892 M16, 2 FM 24/29 LMGs per squad, one VB launcher and hand grenades (36 carbines and 6 LMGs in one platoon) ... and later Erma Vollmer SMGs in the corps francs. The MAS36 CR39, a MAS 36 with foldable stock specially designed for airborne troops was never put into service before the armistice. Seven Boys anti-tank rifles were also already used in the Corps Francs in 1939. The 37mm infantry guns and HMGs are launched in separate containers in the bomb bay of the planes but the small arms are attached to the men during the drop.

The doctrine and formation are inspired from the big Russian trainings observed in Kiev in 1935. Many specific equipments, girdles for the fixation of various equipments, the leg bag etc. are specially studied and realized by the French Air Force. These equipments were presented to the British forces in 1939 and adopted by the British SAS. The parachutes are first British Irvin sport models imported by the SGP (Société Générale des Parachutes) and Russian copies of the Irvin model and later French models : the Aviorex 120 and 130 models.

On 7th October 1937, capitaine Sauvagnac beats the world record of free fall without inhalator with 74 seconds.

At First the doctrine is concerning the use of small saboteurs groups for the destruction of factories or bridges. Many trainings were organized for the new airborne troops. For example in August 1937 the 601st CIA seized a bridge on the Durance and in September 1937 after a drop of 100m only in a rainy sky they seized by surprise the HQ of a whole division.

In October 1938 the whole 601st CIA is dropped on BA112 airbase by 5 planes and in less than 3 minutes after the beginning of the dropping the first 37mm rounds were shot. The German observers invited to this presentation were impressed and unlike the French high command they used these lessons.

In September 1939, the 601st is based in Avignon-Pujaut and the 602nd in Montélimar. In November 1939 they are directed towards Calais where they keep on alert, ready to embark in Farman 224s during one week. They were thought to jump over the Flessingue airbase and Arnemuise isthmus in the Netherlands but the operation was never launched.

The French airborne companies are then used to form 4 "groupes francs" (52 men from the 601st CIA and 91 men from the 602nd CIA commanded by capitaine Glaizot) under the authority of the 28th alpine infantry division in Alsace. These groups are based in the No Man's Land, in Lembach (Alsace), 12km NE of Niederbronn (in the operational area of the 7th and 27th BCA - bataillon de chasseurs alpins -, alpine troops).

On February 14, 1940, the four "Groupes Francs" :

- Lieutenant Chevalier (based in Lembach)
- Lieutenant Le Bourhis (based in Lembach)
- Lieutenant Audebert (based in Obersteinbach, at 15 km)
- Lieutenant Lemaître (based in Obersteinbach, at 15 km)

are commanded by capitaine Henri Glaizot whose HQ is in Lembach.

Usually the work is divided into 3 days of patrol and 1 resting day during which capitaine Glaizot who is also a pilot, uses a recon plane from the observation squadron of Haguenau.

From 14th February to 11th March 1940 they led 28 patrols and 23 ambushes, sometimes more than 3 km behind the German lines. They lost only 2 KIAs (sergent Baratte - 602nd CIA - on 24th February and sergent Solacroup - 601st CIA - on 7th March) and 3 WIAs. They scored about 30 German soldiers.

From 11th to 17th March, they returned in Niederbronn in the French lines and 54 French parachutists were awarded citations and on 22nd March the corps francs are disbanded, the men return to their infanterie de l'air companies.

On 24th April, a group of 30 men from the 601st CIA under the commandment of capitaine Mayer was used for the protection of the French Air Force HQ and the General Vuillemin.

On 29th April, the 601st CIA left Avignon-Pujaut for Vimory next to Montargis (like the 602nd a bit later) and on 11th June the 601st CIA went to Avord. On 12th June a Farman 224 is shot down by a Me110 making 2 KIAs and 4 WIAs. During the different retreats of the French army, they organized the defense of different towns along the Loire river but they saw grossly no combat. The French airborne troops led only offensive actions during the phoney war.

Between 17-27th June 1940, the "infanterie de l'air" is transferred in North Africa and on 25th August 1940, the units are disbanded.