

# How French military trained, fought alongside Ex-FAR in war against RPA

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**The Muse Report, published on Monday April 19, in great detail shows how the French military operatives were relied upon on several occasions by the then government forces – Ex-FAR – during the war against the RPF/A. This excerpt of the report, tackles how the French officers fought alongside the then regime forces to repulse the RPF/A during the initial days of the launch of the liberation struggle that was launched on October 1, 1990.**

The “small force of armed helicopters” whose “rocket attacks against rebel concentrations” helped stop the RPF’s army at Gabiro was reinforcing the Rwandan Army’s para-commando battalion, one of three elite FAR units that had been receiving French training and support prior to the war.

The other two elite FAR units were an aviation squadron (escadrille de l’aviation) and the reconnaissance (“recce”) battalion. Both deployed against the RPF troops in the first days of the war.

On 1 October 1990, there were 17 French military cooperants training the Rwandan military under the auspices of the French Military Assistance Mission (MAM). For instance, five French soldiers trained the aviation squadron’s flight engineers and ground mechanics, and shared their expertise in the Nord 2501, a military transport aircraft.

The FAR needed a lot of training. “[T]he chief challenges encountered this year,” a French officer had written in a January 1990 report, “result from a lack of motivation and taking care, from a lack of interest, from secretiveness and from Rwandan soldiers’ outsized pride, and the economic crisis is making their behavior even worse.”

The outbreak of war did little to disrupt the MAM cooperants’ efforts to



A French soldier supervises the training of Interahamwe militiamen in 1994.  
/ Photo : File.

professionalize Rwanda's military. A report by Col. Galinié, the French defense attaché in Rwanda, explained that even after he ordered the cooperants to temporarily withdraw from the Rwandan military camps where some of them had been living, French cooperation with the FAR "never ceased."

If anything, he said, the withdrawal only strengthened France's assistance, as French cooperants devoted themselves to gathering intelligence. This, Galinié wrote, "allowed us to advise the [Rwandan] officers in a discreet manner without ill-intentioned observers being able to claim that we were participating in military actions."

Galinié delivered much of this advice personally. According to the Duclert Commission Report, Galinié was "[the] de facto military and political advisor to the Rwandan President," with whom he met four times in October 1990, "and was also the main contact for the Rwandan Minister of Defense and the various staffs."

In addition to advising Habyarimana, Galinié provided both advice and, as he put it, "encouragement" to FAR operational commanders. He did this while, at the same time, pressing French military and Ministry of Cooperation officials to supply the FAR with needed ammunition.

Other French military cooperants maintained contacts with their Rwan-

dan colleagues throughout the opening weeks of the war, even after France temporarily called its officers back to the embassy to help prepare plans to evacuate French nationals.

During this time, armed helicopters from the FAR's aviation squadron, which continued to receive advice from French military cooperants, made six "shooting passes" per day over enemy positions — a "very high rate," in the estimation of one French officer who worked with the unit. The helicopters fired 640 rockets in the three weeks after the invasion.

In his MIP testimony, the head of the French Military Cooperation Mission, General Jean Varret, confirmed that there were times, during the early phase of the war, when French instructor-pilots were on board the Gazelle helicopters alongside their Rwandan pupils.

French officials have maintained that the French instructors "were not at the controls of the helicopter to fire" they were onboard only "to provide training in flying and shooting."

Efforts to improve the reconnaissance battalion and para-commando battalion continued as well, to considerable effect on the war effort. The impact was such that, in December 1990, Col. Laurent Serubuga, the FAR deputy chief of staff, declared to the head of the French Military Cooperation Mission that "these units, backed by France, gave Rwanda the October victory."

Serubuga's plea for French support of these units to continue was successful. In fact, in the three and a half years leading up to the Genocide, the French government expanded its support.

The 4 October launch of Operation *Noroît*, in which approximately 150 French troops from a French base in the Central African Republic landed in Kigali, joining the French advisers already in Rwanda, was followed the next day by the arrival of approximately 500 Belgian paratroopers.

Both Belgium and France characterized their missions as the protection of their nationals in Rwanda. As Admiral Lanxade wrote in a 2001 memoir, however, "This increase in our forces was also a clear signal sent to the RPF and, indirectly, to Uganda." In other words, these troops also served as a deterrent of the RPF military advance.

Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko sent an entire battalion plus his personal protection force, the French-trained and well-equipped Division Spéciale Présidentielle ("DSP"), which helped drive the RPF troops from Gabiro.

Reports placed the number of Zairean forces in Rwanda variously at 1,000, 1,200, and 1,500, some of which reportedly participated in "wanton killing, looting, and raping," including a massacre of 200 civilians in Gabiro.

Habyarimana soon asked Zaire to remove its troops from Rwanda. France's involvement had other consequences. When, for example, French and Belgian soldiers secured the Kigali airport, ostensibly to facilitate the evacuation of their nationals, their actions doubled as a favor to the Rwandan government ; as the RPF's James Kabarebe explained, the decision "freed up the FAR to go to the front. The French action said, 'we are securing Kigali for you ; you can go to the front.'"

Col. Galinié — France's military attaché, the head of the Military Assistance Mission to Rwanda, and the commander of *Noroît* — confirmed as much in an 11 October telegram : "If the French and Belgian forces had not relieved [the FAR] by taking over missions and terrain (protecting the airport and the roads leading to it) and if the Zairean forces had not participated directly in the conflict, they would have, at best, shuttered themselves in Kigali in conditions and with a less-than-effective plan."