

The legend and lessons learned from the “taxis de la Marne”

In the collective recollection of World War 1st, the “Taxis de la Marne” episode has a very particular place. **For a large number of our fellow citizens, civilian or military, it was a large scale operation with a decisive importance on the final result of the battle.** This first engagement of motor engine vehicles benefits from a real fame: four weeks after the beginning of the conflict and despite the fact that the French armed forces started the campaign with less than 200 vehicles, the military motor engine transports change from the utmost indifference to the highest popularity.

However, it can be paradoxically noted that on the one hand **this almost epiphenomenon plays a minor role in the framework of the first Marne battle** and that on the other hand the immediate after action critical analysis of its performance enables the Supreme Command to draft the first reference texts establishing the employment doctrine of the motor engine vehicles in the armed forces.

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Reminder of the facts

On September 1st 1914, General Gallieni who had been promoted on August 16th to Paris military Governor to replace General Michel, commands the **requisitioning of all the transport means available in the capital whether horse drawn or motor engine ones.** Beginning on September 2nd, a **“permanent reserve”** is constituted **with the vehicles of the main motor engine taxi companies:** if the threat from the German imperial army on Paris was to become more immediate it would be thus possible in a few hours to evacuate the archives, the works of art and all sensitive equipment from the capital.

At the same moment, in the general framework of the operations on the French frontline, the British expeditionary corps and the French armed forces, even the 3rd Army which reorganizes around Verdun, stop their withdrawal on September 5th and prepare

to counterattack. North-east from Paris the resources of the Soissons - Crépy en Valois railway prove to be insufficient and, on the proposal of his Chief of Staff, General Clergerie, Gallieni accepts that part of the strength of the 14th Brigade be transported by motor engine vehicles in the evening of September 6th. The first vehicles are requisitioned and gathered in the same night, and empty leave Paris.

First gathered in Dammartin-en-Goële, progressively reinforced by the successive convoys constituted at the Invalides, they drive back in the afternoon of the 7th to take on board the men of the 1st and 2nd battalions of the 103rd Inf Rgt and the three battalions of the 104th Inf Rgt, then to set them down south of Nanteuil-le-Haudouin where the 61st Division (Army reserve) is in trouble.

The transported strength does not exceed 4,000 men (5 infantry battalions with 800 men each) carried less than

50 km away. Integrated in the 150,000 men of the 6th Army, itself included in a far larger disposition, they actually just play a limited role at the right of the German moving flank and are not, properly speaking, engaged in a vital sector of the allied disposition.

On September 8th, when most of the vehicles arrive back to their Paris depots, *“the depot leaders read the figures appearing on the meters since the taxis have been operating with their meters on and a few minutes later the taxi drivers can go to the cash desk to get their money”*¹. The cost of requisitioning is not neutral. *“Totally, the Treasury Department had to pay 70,102 francs to the taxi companies for that outstanding journey”*².

When assessing this experience, quickly overstated by the French propaganda, General Galliéni himself said to his secretary a few months later: *“Of course, the importance of the taxis has been somewhat exaggerated but it was a good idea though a very simple one”*³. If the importance of this adventure is

more psychological than operational or military, it is particularly **rich as regards the lessons learned**. Though improvised in emergency and disorder by officers with no experience in transport organization, the episode of the “taxis de la Marne” immediately interests the Armed forces motor engine vehicles service Directorate (AFMEVSD). From its study, compared to the first transports during operations (TDO) on the frontline, the AFMEVSD deduces **an employment doctrine**.

Errors and lessons learned

When analysing the events from September 6th to 8th, the Directorate identifies **everything that must not be done as regards motor engine vehicle transport** :

- 1 The vehicles move empty on half the distance,
- 2 The driving order is un-existing, the drivers do not keep their places in the convoys and do not drive at the same speed,

- 3 The routes are not controlled and there is a mix between the flows to and from the frontline,
- 4 There is no military police and nobody at the crossroads to check the movements,
- 5 The parking places, the assembly, loading and unloading areas are not checked or even established,
- 6 The supplies for the drivers and the refuelling operations are only partially and belatedly organized.

General Clergerie’s later testimony on which is built a large part of the legend of the “taxis de la Marne” proves therefore to be a contingency or even requested report. *“All the necessary measures to ensure the success of the transport had been taken. There were two very distinct main routes making a true noria. Each taxi vehicle was thoroughly checked and repaired prior to departure. Each broken down vehicle would receive help from the first recovery car arriving at its level.*



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The distance between vehicles was 20 meters...⁴. Written more than three years after the facts, and above all more than eighteen months after the organization of the “Voie sacrée” (Sacred way) between Bar-le-Duc and Verdun, it expresses in fact the rules established after the events it is supposed to report.

Making an assessment of this experience and of numerous other operations conducted on the frontline, taking into account the proposals made by officers from the Motor engine vehicles Service in the field, the AFMEVSD releases as early as October 15th **the first “temporary instruction about troop transporting in motor engine vehicles”**. Drafted by Captain Doumenc and signed by General Laffon de Ladebat, Director of the Rear area, this eight page instruction expresses the general principles to be applied to transports, the organization technical rules, the discipline issues and the distribution of the responsibilities between transported troop leaders and the Motor engine vehicles Service officers. It defines more specifically the function of the “road commissary” who must ensure the traffic flow steadiness,

check the route practicability, mark all difficult places, etc. When **announcing the creation of a new function**, it emphasizes above all **“A unique authority must master the transport from one end to the other, operate the loading and unloading operations, define the route, check the movement, it is the transport director”**.

- 1 Major H. Carré, *The true story of the taxis de la Marne*, Paris, Ed. Chapelot, 1921, 110 pages, p. 88.
- 2 Jean-Michel Boniface and Jean-Gabriel Jeudy, *The trucks of victory*, Paris, Ed. Massin, 1996, 236 pages, p. 154.
- 3 Leblond and Ary, *Gallieni speaks, interviews of Paris savior with his secretaries*; 2 vol. Paris, Albin Michel, 1928. Tome 1, p. 56.
- 4 Article released in the *Petit Journal* dated September 9th 1917.
- 5 Translator's note: RETEX (Retour d'Expérience) = Lessons learned

From that time on, the general principles are established. The later experiences, committing more and more important strength and means, permit during the conduct to clarify some points, to modify detail prescriptions, to define the particular mission of each hierarchic level. **World War 1st makes a real breakthrough with the XIXth century wars and sees the establishment of working procedures and the drafting of employment doctrines evolving according to the difficulties encountered in the field.** So Captain Doumenc, a graduate from the Ecole Polytechnique trained in the practice of scientific analysis and experiments, remembered by History as the organizer of the “Voie sacrée”, writes the first official text to be applied to all the services dealing with the transport of troops in vehicles during operations, based on a “RETEX” (that not yet bore that name)⁵ the lessons learned from which kept a surprising actuality through the XXth century.