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A. Bouzid, 'Summary of Armament during the 1954 Revolution'

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Summary:

Summarizes the logistical process and efforts of armament for the Algerian revolution, from 1947-1962. Lists the various countries who supplied the Algerians with weapons and ammunition, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Libya, East Germany, and China. Outlines, in detail, the processes for transporting weapons across borders, the logistical structure of departments handling distribution and supply of weapons for the revolution, and modes of transport for these supplies.

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MINISTRY OF ARMAMENTS AND GENERAL COMMUNICATIONS – EASTERN LOGISTICS DIRECTORATE

“SUMMARY OF ARMAMENT DURING THE 1954 REVOLUTION”

by A. BOUZID, JULY 1996

This is an outline of the mission, organization, and activities of the armament [i.e., weapons] service in the Algerian revolution. Without access to archives or precise statistics, this modest research and reconstitution contribution is the fruit of a small working group consisting of former militants in the armament service.

THE SITUATION BEFORE 1 NOVEMBER 1954

The onset of our revolution required several years of reflection, of concentration, of maturation, as well as painful experiences; the idea took root among a group of honest militants toward the end of the 1940s, following the defeats suffered during the different attempts carried out on the political front by nationalist parties at that time, and particularly by the exacerbation of the suffering of our people, victim of brutal and bloody oppression during that decade.

Convinced that armed struggle was the only path to the liberation of Algeria from the colonial yoke and to regain its independence, a group of militants approached the Central Committee during its 1947 session, but the latter did not follow up.

Despite the differences in that instance, a Special Armed Organization known as the OS [Organisation Spéciale] was established by a dedicated group of militants. The OS was an organization based on rigid and closely guarded structures covering the bulk of the national territory; its human component was selected on the basis of criteria of dedication and militantism. Its foremost objective was: paramilitary training (theoretical and practical), recovery of weapons, ammunition, [other] equipment of all types, observation equipment, and the gathering of all types of information.

Unfortunately, this organization was dismantled by the French occupier in 1950. Its militants were thrown in jail and sentenced to heavy terms: others tracked down by the colonial police managed to join the maquis at that time.

However, the commitment [to independence] among committed militants never faded and the date of the launching of the armed revolution was proclaimed in great secrecy during the ultimate meeting of the “21 Responsibles” [21 Responsables] at the home of the militant Derridj Elias in Algiers. That was the 1st of November, a date which will mark in golden and bloody letters the history of our people.

ARMAMENT DURING THE REVOLUTION

The launching of an armed revolution must, fundamentally, depend on: A) the unshakable faith of its militants in the righteousness of their cause; B) the acceptance of its objectives by its people; C) material means, especially the arming of troops.

ARMAMENT IN 1954

Already between the years of 1948 and 1950, important quantities of weapons (Stati guns recovered from Libya and dating from the last World War) had been buried in secret caches in the Aures region.

ARMAMENT IN 1955

Egypt was our most reliable ally, as important to us as it was to our immediate neighbors to the East and to the West. The Maghreb Office was based in Cairo, but funding often came from other Arab states. The Saudi royal family offered the first consequential gift in cash to the Algerian revolution. The first resolution on Algeria at the United Nations was introduced and promoted by its representative at the UN. That was followed by the reigning family in Iraq and then by all the other Arab rulers. Weapons were supposed to be sent to the Algerian revolution. Domestically, most weapons were seized from the French army.

ARMAMENT IN 1956

In 1956, after the Soummam Congress, the CCE [Comité de Coordination et d'Exécution] designated two high representatives of the ALN [Armée de Libération Nationale; National Liberation Army] to set up national structures abroad (Tunis and Cairo): Colonel OUAMRANE [was made] responsible for political and military affairs; Colonel BENAOUA, responsible for arming the Wilayas.

On 20 November 1956, an important shipment of weapons coming from Egypt was transferred to Tunisia and assigned as follows:

Wilaya I: 400 303 guns and FM Bren machine guns with ammunition.

Wilaya II: 400 guns and FM Bren machine guns with ammunition.

Wilaya III: 450 guns and FM Bren machine guns with ammunition.

Wilaya IV: 550 guns and FM Bren machine guns with ammunition.

Eastern base 100 guns and FM Bren machine guns with ammunition.

Transport from Egypt was done by the "Bedford" truck of the revolution and a big Libyan rig belonging to Brother Salem CHELBK placed graciously at the disposition of Algeria. Relay points were established all along this route: Marsa Matrouh - Benghazi - Tripoli - Tunis - the Eastern Frontier of Algeria.

Before that important shipment, the brothers Mahsas and Laskri had sent thirty 303 guns to Wilaya II on 10 November 1956.

It should be noted that a few weeks after the docking of the Athos, [a ship] loaded with weapons destined for the Eastern Front of the ALN, the tripartite (France - Britain - Israel) invasion of Egypt took place in 1956. This was above all a punitive expedition against a brotherly country and, symbolically, against all the other Arab countries that dared help the Algerians. From that point on, the supply of weapons from the Middle East by maritime channel was compromised, but not for very long because despite this embargo other attempts were made afterwards: Athos II, the Slovenia, the Dina.

[...]

Our struggle came out stronger and these events had major implications throughout the world. Arab and Muslim countries closed rank and increased their aid to Algeria. A few months later, other friendly countries began sending important shipments of

weapons to the port of Alexandria.

ARMAMENT IN 1957

[...]

To be sure, our itineraries were seriously exposed to potential risks and our convoys subjected to harsh tests. Weapons delivery trucks circulated only at night and were often flown over by enemy planes.

On the political front, pressures were applied by the English and the French, still militarily present in Libya and Tunisia. Astute camouflage was necessary to cross the Tunisian border because of the presence of French garrisons at Bengardane, and a force to monitor the Tunisia-Libya border.

All the opportunities were exploited to transfer our weapons, including shuttles of chalutiers [medium-size fishing vessel] and fishing barges between the two frontiers. Plastic explosives were sent by those same channels to Algiers.

Iraq sent us three big "Antonov" carriers loaded with mortars of 50, 60, 80, and 81 millimeters, artillery shells, FM and sub-machine guns.

Turkey gave us, following the visit to Tripoli of Turkish president Gale BAYAR who had met the Colonel OUAMRANE, 5,000 PA and munitions for MG34 and 42. All these deliveries, as well as the stocks of Tarhouna (Libya), were sent to the Eastern Frontier.

ARMAMENT IN 1958-1959

In February 1958, a CCE session lead to the creation of various departments, including the Department for Armaments and of General Relations [DALG; Département de l'Armement et des Liaisons Générales], to replace the previous Logistical Service. [The DALG's] mission would consist of assuring the transport and the delivery of weapons from different centers toward the Algeria-Tunisia and Algeria-Morocco Frontiers. This department was placed under Colonel OUAMRANE.

It assumed responsibility for procuring weapons, materiel, and foodstuff in the guise of gifts and purchases, and for assuring their delivery to the Eastern and Western Frontiers. Despite the close surveillance of the Algerian coastline by the French Navy, a new attempt made in the spring of the same period, culminating in the docking of the Slovenja.

The DALG was structured as follows: A central directorate in Cairo, and three principal centers [of operation]: Morocco-Tunisia-Libya, with two substructures in Benghazi and Marsa Matrouh. An antenna was also set up in Europe.

Aside from the means of the revolution, overland transport was often assumed benevolently by Libyan sympathizers (Abdellah ABED and Salem CHELBEK) during this period.

In September 1958, following the proclamation of the GPRA, the DALG was transformed into the MARG: Ministry of Armaments and General Supplies [Ministère de l'Armement et du Ravitaillement Général], with the same missions. This ministry was placed under Colonel Mahmoud CHERIF.

ARMAMENT IN 1960, 1961, 1962

The ex-MARG and the MLGC [Ministère des Liaisons Générales et des Communications] were fused into one ministry under the direction of Colonel Abdelhafid BOUSSOUF.

It was clear that these two very sensitive and strategic departments had to be joined to operate in perfect symbiosis given the confidential character of their objectives and the secrecy of their actions.

To recall, during the period in question, the Algerian issue had grown considerably important on the military and diplomatic fronts (large-scale French military operations; deliberations at the United Nations; Franco- Algerian negotiations).

The logistical structures underwent significant change, at both the organizational and activities levels. Two large directorates were created:

The DLE [Direction Logistique Est] with two sub-directorates:

a) Weapons and Material;

b) Supplies and General Resupplying.

The DLO [Direction Logistique Ouest] in the West.

A mission abroad was also created.

DLE: Its siege was in Tunis, under the GPRA, and disposed of offices and representatives in the following countries: Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Germany. Its mission consisted specifically in ensuring: 1) the transport, delivery, and safety of weapons and military equipment from the Middle East to the Eastern Frontier (General Staff); 2) the resupplying and support of our army at the Eastern Frontier, and [supporting] the services of the GPRA in Tunisia.

I: SUB-DIRECTORATE OF WEAPONS AND MATERIAL

Weapons were acquired by our missions abroad with the funds of the revolution, or came from brotherly and friendly countries in the form of gifts to the Algerian revolution: friendly ships delivered their cargo at ports in Alexandria, Tripoli, and Tunis.

Our storage facilities, for security purposes, were in Egypt and Libya, with very little [kept] in Tunisia.

A) TRANSPORT AND DELIVERY

[...]

Transport was generally done over land from Egyptian storage facilities to the Eastern Frontier of the country. Two to three rotations of convoys, each consisting of 4 to 6 big carriers, sometimes more, carried 300 to 400 tons of weapons monthly. This was in addition to special requests and special deliveries. (In July 1959, 13,000 tons of weapons from China were unloaded at the port of Alexandria)

[...]

Each section consisted of many vehicles of the same tonnage.

Each vehicle was operated by 2 drivers, to cross one country in one night – one night for Libya, one night for Tunisia. Movement by day was forbidden; we circulated only at night to escape the curious and the enemy.

In certain high risk zones, drivers drove with headlights off. Our heavy vehicles had been modified by our own personnel to augment by a factor of 3 or 4 their autonomy so that a truck could cover the distance from the Egyptian Frontier to the Eastern Algerian Frontier without stopping or refueling. In each section there was a tow truck with mechanics. It was forbidden to stall and to leave our vehicles outside our centers.

[...]

B) THE PYROTECHNICAL AND WEAPONS WORKSHOP

It was tasked with fabricating the “Bangalore,” a tube of a certain length filled with explosives allowing ALN units to create breaches in the electrified fences set up on the Frontiers (Challe Line and Morice Line), as well as passage through minefields. Other items (tripods, scopes, chargers, etc.) were also produced in this workshop, which also repaired [and upgraded] weapons of all calibers.

C) THE MECHANICAL WORKSHOPS

Those were in charge of the repair and upkeep of the totality of the vehicle inventory of the DLE, of the vehicles and the engines of our army, and of the vehicle inventory of the GPRA (300 vehicles).

To avoid stopping at gas stations and be noticed, the transport vehicles for weapons and supplies had their gas tanks modified.

[...]

D) THE SPARE PARTS WORKSHOP

[...]

E) WOODWORKING WORKSHOPS

They were tasked with maintaining and repairing the big carriers and the engines of the army, as well as manufacturing special containers for the transport of weapons and explosives to Algeria and Morocco.

F) THE GENERAL SERVICE

It was responsible for the security of the workshops and storage areas of the two sub-directions, as well as for escorting convoys.

II. THE SUB-DIRECTORATE FOR FOODSTUFF AND RESUPPLY

[...] In charge of ensuring the resupply and the transfer of equipment of all kind of the EMG to the Eastern frontier.

THE PURCHASE COMMISSION

The summary of the activities of this commission during the period 1960-1961 indicated that the purchases made in Tunisia for the resupply of our units on the borders was by itself 1,500,000,000 of Tunisian dinars (1 DT + 10 FF). The products and other supplies acquired were regularly controlled and analyzed in labs.

[...]

THE TORREFACTION [COFFEE BEAN ROASTING] WORKSHOP

[...] 150 tons of ground coffee to the frontiers; the beans were directly imported from outside.

THE CUSTOMS AND TRANSIT UNIT

This unit was necessitated by the growing volume of arrivals in the port of Tunis and the confidentiality of the merchandise. It processed, to illustrate, during the last quarter of 1961-1962, 20,000 tons of merchandise, including 150,000 [tons] retrieved from Tunisian ports and coming from the following countries: Libya, Morocco, Malaysia, Hong Kong, China, USSR, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, France, Holland, England, Italy, GFR. [...]

At all levels, our priority was to place everything at the disposition of the military command in the briefest delays and in total security. Our fighting brothers, despite being inferior in numbers and in equipment relative to the colonial armies, which had access to an entire modern arsenal supported by NATO, were able because of their faith and with our logistical means to achieve spectacular military operations which today figure among the greatest military feats in the history books of the world, along with [those of] Vietnam.

GENERAL COMMENTS

[...]

The use of Bangalores and incessant shelling by our artillery did not succeed in opening breaches [in the Challes Line and the Morice Line] that were sufficiently secure to guarantee the permanent resupply of our troops inside our country.

[...]

However, to circumvent this embargo, other means were devised, notably:

- the opening of the southern front from GHAT (Libyan Fezane) toward Illiz and In-Amennas;

- the transport of weapons from the port of Conakry, in Guinea, across that country and Mali to reach Bordj Badji Mokhtar, Taman Rasset and Ain-Salah, thanks to the support of the leaders of those countries and the solidarity of their peoples. All modes of transportation were used: from vehicles to camels, including also horses and men;

- the maritime channel was never completely abandoned, despite the surveillance means of the French Navy and its intelligence networks in the Mediterranean. Thus, several crates of weapons were delivered to the interior from the French federation through the maritime channel;

- the air channel, through which shells and weapons had been sent from Tripoli to Casablanca onboard civilian planes belonging to the BOAC [British Overseas Airways Corporation];

- the weapons pouches carried by VIPs who delivered them to the interior of the country.

In conclusion, the resupply in vital weapons to the fighting units of the ALN was one of the essential occupations of our staff at all levels. It was done in particularly difficult conditions thanks to the abnegation, the resourcefulness, and the supreme sacrifice of the best of us.

APPENDIX [1]

The shipment of weapons to the Eastern frontier: the transport took place from Egypt to Libya and then from Libya to Tunisia.

- 1957: two return trips per months with six 10-ton trucks; itinerary Marsa Matrouh - Tarhouna.

- 1958: two return trips per months with six 10-ton trucks.

- 1959: six return trips per month with six Mercedes trucks of 10 tons and six Lancia trucks of 25 tons (Chinese delivery - - 20,000 U.S. guns 7.62 with SASCO trucks of 10 tons).

- 1960: two return trips per month with six Mercedes trucks of 10 tons.

- 1961: four return trips per month with six trucks.

- 1962: four return trips per month with twelve trucks.

APPENDIX [2]

Modes of transportation used:

MARITIME CHANNEL

□ □□
□□□ □□□
Nationality □□□ □□□ □□□
Arrival Port □□□ □□
□□□ □□□
Chinese □□□ □□□ □□□
Alexandria and Tunis □□□
□□□ □□
□□□ □□□
Russian □□□ □□□ □□□
Alexandria □□□ □□
□□□ □□□
Jordan □□□ □□□ □□□
Alexandria □□□ □□

□□□ □□□

Greece □□□ □□□ □□□

Alexandria and Tunis □□□

□□□ □□

□□□ □□□

Others □□□ □□□ □□□

Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco □□□ □□

AIR CHANNEL

(from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iraq)

OVERLAND ROUTE

Itinerary: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia: approximately 2600 km

Itinerary: Eastern frontier: approximately 200 km