

## SFAX (1952)

(Association Nationale des Anciens Combatants de la Banque de France. Retrieved on October 1, 2007 from <http://www.anac-fr.com/algerie/alg.htm>)

Enlisted in September 1945, I was sent with the Southern Indo-China Amphibious Forces (F.A.I.S.), as a radio operator. After two years spent in this marvellous country where many buddies lost their life, I was repatriated to my homeland of Tunisia; I then lived in Sfax in the south of Tunisia.

From 1949 to 1955, a pretence of peace had returned, although riots and scuffles occurred from time to time. Europeans were attacked on the roads; in the French city of Sfax, bands of young people came down from the Kasbah to ransack the shops. Fortunately, we were protected by the men of the 5th RTT stationed all around the Arab city. In a state of alert, we formed part of a territorial guard day and night.

I was recalled to the Harbour office of the port of Sfax to take care of the installations and to signal if anything unusual occurred. One evening in March 1952, whereas I had taken my station, after my work around 8 p.m., there was a really fantastic event, if I can express myself like this.

By myself in the buildings of the Harbour office, I actually listened in graphic and sound communications to the fast patrol boats which skirted the coasts of the Gulf of Gabès to monitor the movements of the *fellaghas*, nationalists, and their traffic of weapons. This night, all seemed to be going well; when suddenly the door of the vast room opened abruptly. A sailor, alarmed, leaped like a devil, panicked as I could see, He stammered in a monotone voice: "they had me, they attacked me, they took my weapon, my machine-gun; but, I could before descending one from them. I heard it shout on the trawler which escaped, all lights extinguished ". All that was said so quickly that I asked the sailor to calm himself and to tell me everything. That is what he did, calmly, after regaining his breath.

Here are the facts: forming part of the crew of a high-speed motorboat of the marine surveillance, armed with a 20mm a gun, patrolling along the coasts, this sailor was on guard and alone on board. Suddenly, he saw advancing towards him someone who needed identification; The guy was wary, but too late, two other men struck him from behind and went up on a trawler which, without noise, had come alongside the vedette. The attackers, while leaving, had taken the poor fellow's

machine-gun. Coming to himself and seeing the trawler fleeing, he had the presence of mind to go on the vedette, take his rifle, adjusted and fired in direction of the trawler. There, he heard a cry and tells me that he had hit somebody. At once, I say to him to remain at the station and left to see commander Guillaume who controlled the port of Sfax. He thanked me and alerted the authorities or the gendarmerie because, as I returned towards my guy, the territorial gendarmes, dressed in khaki, arrived and treated it without care by saying that he had drunk too much and that he had lost his machine-gun in the deep water of the port. Then, the gendarmes brought him with them. Order was restored towards 1 o'clock in the morning; I found myself alone in front of my High Frequency station for the remainder of the night.

I had an intuition walking around my head. I told myself: "If the boat has left, it has to return before daybreak, so as not to get the blame for its escapade."

I therefore put my station on loudspeaker in order to maintain contact with my high-speed motorboats and to enable me to observe the horizon with my binoculars.

The high-speed motorboats criss-crossed the sea, trying in vain to find the trawler. Around 4 o'clock in the morning the moon rose, a full moon as large as a basketball, by which saw I in the middle of this glow, a trawler all lights extinguished, taking the direction of the channel and the port. It was about twelve nautical miles away; a good hour and half separated it from the port. No doubt, it was my trawler. Also dry, I go to awake my commander who, fortunately, lived with reasonably close (lit: "at a few cables length") and to him I gave my account. He congratulated me and had to set up a method of reception because, meanwhile, the trawler berth in the port of the fishermen, but in a place called at that time "Madagascar", because this ground end and Sfax were separate. This small island, opposite the fishing port, had since been connected to the firm ground, when the phosphate port of Sfax was constructed. Consequently it had retained this name. At this early hour it was an isolated place where one could with leisure be hidden amongst the carcasses of old sailing ships, it was a cemetery of hulls at the same time as a port of repair.

I learned the end of this insane and tormented night only in pieces. The gendarmes found a corpse, the sailor had seriously wounded a man who died of hemorrhage. They also found the stolen machine-gun. The unhappy sailor attacked by the crew of the trawler recovered from his shock with congratulations and an exceptional thirty days leave. And me, after three years of good and faithful services

in the Royale in T.O.E. (external operations theatre), I was demobilized as chief quartermaster.

The action taken was serious because the tub and all its crew, owner at the head, were to be transferred to Bizerte the next week, though I do not know for what reason. The business remained secret.

Thus this strange history ended.

George DÉGOUTE