REMEMBERING VICE-ADMIRAL DU FOURNET--SAVIOUR OF MUSA LER ARMENIANS

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Category: Opinions



May 6, 2010 - Dordogne, France

Vice-Admiral Louis Dartige du Fournet

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In the small cemetery of the village, overlooking the valley where the admiral once lived, the Armenian delegation and those who conducted the research to find the grave of the Admiral, gathered for the event along with officials of the community, naval officers, young singers and musicians of the Naregatsi orchestra and the public.

A ceremony, charged with emotion, was brought to its climax with the long speech (in perfect French) by Thomas Aintabian, a computer history buff born in Anjar, Lebanon and currently living in Yerevan, Armenia, a descendant of survivors of Mousa Ler (see video clip below)

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> *"My grandmother spoke of a noble and courageous admiral who had become their savior. On April 24, 1915, after the decapitation of the Armenian elite, our ancestors were forced to leave their ancestral land, Refusing to be deported, Mousalertsi population climbed the foothills of the mountains overlooking the Mediterranean sea and fought for more than forty days, on*

> *unequal terms, against the Ottoman army. The stories of my grandmother and the strong appreciation of the people of Jebel Musa (Mount Moses) pushed me to do these searches. We are all indebted to the Admiral Fournet."*
> *-- Thomas Aintabian --*

Forced again to flee their land in 1939, the Armenians of Musa Ler settled in Anjar, a village in Lebanon. There they created a museum which houses all that relates to their past history; a white sheet with the red cross, carefully folded, a symbol so dear to the hearts of all Mousalertsi people. This same flag was carved in white marble for this event, by Lebanese-Armenian sculptor Boghos Agassi, a descendant of the survivors.

On May 6, 2010, a delegation of Armenians from France, Armenia, Lebanon and the United States along with elected officials of St. Chamassy in France, unveiled the symbolic plaque on the tomb of vice-admiral Louis du Fournet.
Three days before the ceremony, the sculpture was blessed and embraced by the solemn Mass celebrated in memory of the Admiral in Anjar, Lebanon. It is now affixed on his grave.

Photo: The sculptured flag of the survivors now rests on the tomb of Admiral Louis Dartigeas Fournet, savior of the Armenians of Musa Ler.

Background history:

Off the northern tip of the Bay of Antioch, vice-admiral Fournet was confronted with the massacres of Christian Armenians perpetrated by the Turks. In this mountainous region of Jebel Musa (Mount Moses), the ancient kingdom of Little Armenia, the Ottomans started a systematic annihilation of the Armenians which was part of the Genocide where 1.5million Armenians were killed.
Bachi-bazouks Ottoman and fanatic looters began to harass the fugitives. The Armenians found themselves quickly surrounded and without food and ammunition.
On September 5, 1915, they managed to attract the attention of a French ship, the cruiser Guichen, sailing on the northern coast of Syria, with a white sheet marked with a red cross (symbol of the plaque unveiled at this event at St.-Chamassy).
His commanding officer made contact with the young freedom-fighter Peter Dimlakian.
Telegraph crackled and the next day, French naval ships Joan of Arc and Desaix of the third squadron, arrived at the zone.
Under the full authority of the vice-admiral Fournet, on September 12 & 13, 1915, 4,080 Armenians were embarked on the ships "Lightning", "the D'Estrees," the Guichen, "Admiral Charner" and " the Desaix.
Blocking the tracks against the Turks, fighting against bad weather, orchestrating a back and forth to the raft boats, the French sailors did their best to evacuate the Armenians to Port Said, Egypt.

In Egypt, the Armenians were welcomed as refugees then to be dispersed to Europe, the Middle-East and the Americas.
Whilst retaining the name "Mussalertsi" (children of Mount Mussa), their descendants are more than 50,000 around the world today. As Daniel said in Cahors, "without Dartigeas, they would not exist."

From the French navy archives:

> *"...the evacuation of a majority of women, children and elderly has been possible thanks to the naval ships of "Desaix" and "Guichen", who de-moralized the Turkish troops. The Navy itself has contributed to the success with his ship "Anne"*
> *-- Admiral Darrieus-cons --*

Armenians in general and "Mussalertsi" in particular have “moved heaven and earth” to find the grave of the Vice-Admiral Fournet, on their part, historians and Brigitte Gilles Delluc have helped by bulletins in the Historical and Archaeological Society of Perigord in 2007.

About the Admiral:

Louis Dartige du Fournet, was born in Orne Putanges, France, on March 2, 1856. He joined the naval academy in 1872, where he graduated top in his class.
He proved his abilities during his first year of active duty in Siam (Myanmar). In 1893 he attacked the Menam Pass with his brigade -The Comet- to clear the port of Bangkok, a feat which earned him the rank of captain. In 1909 he was promoted to admiral and then vice-admiral, following the Balkan War of 1912-1913.

During the First World War, Dartige became the commander of the Third French Squadron which had just been formed. Based in Syria, the squadron was responsible for enforcing the blockade of the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, enacted in August 1915.

He rescued 4,058 Armenians who were surrounded by the Turkish army on Mount Moses (Musa Ler), located on the Syrian coast, north of the Bay of Antioch, and evacuated them to Port-Said (Egypt). He then commanded the allied fleets of the East in the Bosphorus. His brilliant service, his intellect, his passionate leadership gained him the reputation as being the hero of the city called Paknam.
After the war, he wrote about his career. His memoirs were re-published several times.
Fournet's career involved two other significant events. The first was glorious: In the summer of 1915, he took the necessary steps to evacuate Armenians who had escaped the Genocide. His portrait appears in a supplement to the *Diary--and Country France* magazine.

The second episode was tragic. On December 1, 1916, near Athens, the Greek Army fought against the landing of French forces. The French wanted to force the King Constantine to take a positive attitude towards the Allies. The French lost six officers and 64 sailors during the bloody conflict The massacre of French soldiers was dubbed the "Greek Vespers". The admiral had just been promoted grand officer of the Legion of Honour. His cap bears the three-star of a vice-admiral.

He then was accused of being responsible for the death of the French soldiers and officers and failure to capture Athens, hence was abruptly dismissed and left his command of the squadron on December 18, 1916.

In 1922, he married Edmee de La Borie of the Batut Périgueux (Dordogne). Never had any children. In his villa called -*Paknam*- (named after the city he had liberated) he wrote his memoirs.

He died on February 17, 1940 and is buried in St. Chamassy (Dordogne).
His wife's relatives still inhabit the village.

Sources: Naregatsi, sudouest

The ceremony on French TV:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veD4lHAm6WA

Click on a picture below to start the slide-show of the Օծում ceremony in Anjar, followed by the actual installation of the monument on the tomb in France and historic photos of the rescue:
(pictures from the collection of Tovmas Aintabian, Armenia)