



Ambassador's Activities

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58 Knightsbridge, SW1X 7JT London
E-Mail: press@ambafrance-uk.org
Web: www.ambafrance-uk.org

Speech by HE Bernard Emié,
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

for the inauguration of the commemorative plaque in honour of Yves Mahé
in Coney Street, York

2 May 2014

Cher Ian Reed,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

For a French ambassador, unveiling a commemorative plaque in honour of Yves Mahé isn't an inauguration like any other, because Yves Mahé isn't a figure like any other. He embodies what is greatest about the alliance of the British and French peoples.

When one thinks about the Second World War and those huge military forces pitted against each other, it's hard to imagine that a single combatant could have reversed the outcome of a battle. Yves Mahé ranks among those outstanding men and women of destiny of whom it can be said, to echo the words of Winston Churchill, that "never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few". On 29 April 1942, he saved an entire city from destruction. Yves Mahé is the stuff heroes are made of.

Let me retrace the extraordinary life of this young man from Nantes. Yves Mahé had been an aviation enthusiast before the war. As soon as it broke out, he naturally joined the French air force, and he was posted to a unit stationed in the Bouches-du-Rhône in southern France. The German advance forced it to withdraw to Algeria.

So far, his story resembles that of thousands of other soldiers, from the "phoney war" through to the debacle. But he was soon to stand out above the rest: outraged by the Armistice, he decided to answer General de Gaulle's appeal and join the newly-formed Free French Forces. He was one of the very first to join the Resistance, in June 1940 – part of that national surge that was to restore France's honour and lead it to victory. There was nothing

ordinary about his departure for England: he stole a tourist plane at an Algerian base and flew to Gibraltar, where he was able to embark on a cargo ship bound for the UK.

After a new period of training, he was posted to the Royal Air Force's 253 Fighter Squadron, in his capacity as a Free French Air Force pilot. In the operations he took part in with immense courage until the war ended, he was always in the front line: attacking enemy coastal positions, protecting maritime convoys and, of course, flying perilous night-time patrols to defend the country against Luftwaffe onslaughts.

On Wednesday 29 April 1942, 40 German bombers set York ablaze and headed for the large Rowntree factory, which contained enough explosives to unleash a disaster fatal to the city.

Yves Mahé's last-minute arrival was the stuff of legend. While conducting a night patrol, he saw glowing flames in the distance; single-handedly, he dive-bombed the attackers out of the blue, taking them by surprise. The image conjures up a knight in armour's heroic charge on his steed; as was said of pilots of the time, this was truly modern-day chivalry.

He brought one bomber down and severely damaged another; unaware of where the shots were coming from, the Germans scattered, routed before they could reach the factory.

At 23 years old, Yves Mahé saved the day. He was alone in the skies when he attacked the enemy forces. But he was, of course, far from being alone in defending York.

The city's residents showed immense courage during the York Blitz: the ground-to-air defence, firemen, ambulance staff, police, civilians, retired soldiers and those on leave all risked their lives to save the wounded, limit the damage and protect their city.

Those same residents paid the French pilot the highest honour: he was given a reception at the Mansion House, where the French tricolour was flown. General de Gaulle, for his part, awarded him the *Croix de Guerre*.

This alone would have been enough to produce a Second World War hero. But his career was far from over. When he learned about the formation of the Normandie-Niemen French fighter regiment, which was destined to fight on the Eastern front, he immediately asked to join, and this resulted in him going to the USSR in November 1942. He distinguished himself by further acts of bravery; in particular he was involved in a battle alone against three Luftwaffe fighter-bombers.

On 7 May 1943, after he had clocked up more than 700 flying hours, his aircraft was shot down by anti-aircraft guns. Yet he managed to land behind enemy lines, and was taken prisoner. So begins a particularly tough episode. He attempted many escapes, was recaptured, maltreated and condemned to death, and managed to escape execution by hiding in the camp. He was rescued only during the Liberation in 1945, when he returned to the Normandie-Niemen regiment, of which he took command in 1952, to pursue an outstanding career in the French air force.

Fate was to decree that he would die in an aircraft, but not under enemy fire: he died in a crash during an air mission in Belgium in 1962. He was Lieutenant-Colonel, an *officier*

in the *Légion d'Honneur*, a *Compagnon de la Libération* and was decorated by the French Resistance.

So I'm particularly honoured, ladies and gentlemen, to be here in Coney Street to unveil this commemorative plaque. I'm very pleased that the initiative for this plaque was taken not by veterans or historians but children, from St Wilfrid's primary school. The pupils presented a petition to the Mayor in April 2013 after being fascinated by a Hurricane fighter plane exhibited at the Yorkshire Air Museum and being captivated by the story of Yves Mahé. It goes to show that these stories are indeed being passed on from one generation to another, thanks to people such as my friend Ian Reed. You already know, *cher* Ian, how grateful we are to you for all you've done at the Yorkshire Air Museum to remember French and British airmen: without you, this plaque wouldn't be here.

Today France, through me, extends its thanks to the city of York, the pupils of St Wilfrid's, Ian Reed and the whole team at the Yorkshire Air Museum – which I'm going to visit after this ceremony – for this very fine tribute to a great French airman./.