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Bataille de France, 1940. Repenser les forces aériennes au combat

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## A Thinker of French Air Defence: General Accart

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# A Thinker of French Air Defence: General Accart

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- 1 In issue 227 of the *Revue historique des armées*, Patrick Facon paid a committed tribute to General Martial Valin.<sup>1</sup> Apart from underlining the fact that he remained a “general for life” without being elevated to the rank of marshal of the air force, this article raises the question of the tributes paid to the high authorities of the air force. Indeed, few aviators’ careers have been the subject of scientific studies. Let us mention here the recent biography of General Stehlin by the historian Mathieu Gantelet<sup>2</sup> or the study devoted to General Paul Gérardot by Charles Christienne.<sup>3</sup>
- 2 Among the forgotten generals of historical studies is the air corps general Jean-Mary Accart. Described as a “brilliant character”, “cultured” and “humanist”,<sup>4</sup> and having achieved an exemplary career, General Accart was also distinguished by his thinking on airpower which had an influence on the post-war reconstruction of the air force. More precisely, this ace of the Battle of France was distinguished by his vision of what a modern French air defence should be in the NATO era. On a broader level, General Accart’s career and

thought deserve a more thorough study than the few pages that follow.

- 3 The corpus selected for this article includes Accart's military file, which can be consulted at the Defence Historical Service (*Service historique de la défense* or SHD). This remains fairly factual and provides a chronology of his service records. The latter are extremely precise but the file is not conducive to an exhaustive study and would benefit from being enriched with more varied documents (press cuttings for example) as is the case with the file on Marshal Juin. Fortunately, the oral archives of the SHD contain a particularly complete oral testimony by General Accart (three hours of recording), produced in 1984, which brings this general officer back to life. Although this type of source is subject to various hazards (approximations of memory, sometimes subjective account of the speakers), the interview made by the Historical Service of the Air Force is accompanied by a precious analytical account that allows one to refer to the military file. Finally, Jean-Mary Accart can be studied through the various writings he produced during his career. First, his books, which are halfway between testimony and reflection on air power, and, second, his doctrinal output, written both in the context of his various postings and published in the Air Force's monthly review, *Forces aériennes françaises*. This taste for writing, culture and reflection makes Accart an example of an airman who was able to put pen to paper to guide and support the post-war reconstruction of the air force.
- 4 More specifically, this article proposes to paint the portrait of a leader who worked to ensure that France had a powerful air defence, i.e., an important military and diplomatic tool in the context of the Cold War.

## **1. Jean-Mary Accart, the aviator**

### **1. 1. From the navy to aviation**

- 5 Born on 7 April 1912 in Fécamp, Jean-Mary Accart grew up on the English Channel and enjoyed sport as a youth, with an early interest in aviation. He entered the labour market as a cadet in September 1930 with the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique. In 1932, he did

his military service in the French Navy, with an admission to the reserve officers' school, before being posted to the Aeromaritime Centre, at the Hourtin observation school, which marked his turn towards aviation. After two postings in naval aviation, during which he experimented with dive-bombing against submarines, Accart published his first articles. He wrote anonymously in the magazine *Les Ailes*, or in the *Revue de l'armée de l'air* about the impact of aviation on maritime communications.<sup>5</sup> Disappointed by the navy environment, which he considered too conservative, and unconvinced of the usefulness of expensive battleships at the time of military aviation,<sup>6</sup> he was transferred to the young air force in October 1935 following the air-navy agreements on the distribution of air forces.

- 6 His career as an aviator began as an observer pilot but he shifted to fighters and in December 1936 joined the 1/5 fighter group (GC) stationed in Reims, a base he commanded after the Second World War. As an officer, he led the training of the 1/5 and subjected its pilots to intense shooting sessions, manoeuvring exercises with the other subunits of the armed forces, and night flights. In 1937, he took part in the Zürich airshow from which he returned with the certainty that war was approaching and that German aircraft were superior to those of the air force. He intensified the training of his pilots who were converted to Curtiss H-75, a manoeuvrable but underpowered aircraft with light armament. His experience enabled him to assume the interim command of the SPA 67 squadron in 1937, then to be promoted to captain on 15 June 1939 and to take charge of the 1st squadron of the 5<sup>th</sup> fighter squadron.

## 1. 2. An ace of the French campaign

- 7 Because of the location of his unit, Accart took an active part in the fighting of the Battle of France. He belonged to the 1/5, the fighter group that had one of the highest numbers of victories during this period. It was there that Accart acquired the status of Ace (with 12 certain and 4 probable victories)<sup>7</sup> like several of his comrades. It was there that he encountered Lieutenant Dorance, for example, but above all became friends with Marin La Meslée. After the war, Accart participated in keeping his memory alive within the air force. He was one of the people interviewed by Michel Mohrt<sup>8</sup> met when the latter

wrote the biography of Marin La Meslée. In the same way, Accart dedicated a touching tribute to him in the magazine *Icare*<sup>9</sup> and participated in the erection of the stele in honour of his fallen comrade in 1945. It was also he who decided to name the Reims air base “Commandant Edmond Marin La Meslée” when he took command in 1952.

- 8 From the air battles conducted between September 1939 and June 1940, Accart retained the advantage conferred by the repetition of training: in addition to superiority over the enemy, it also made it possible to increase flight safety, a theme that was dear to him throughout his career in the institution. Noting that his group suffered more casualties from accidents than from combat, Accart believed that this was due to the temperature and pressure variations associated with high-altitude flights, which tired the pilots who were already exhausted from having been kept on alert throughout the “phoney war” with little staff turnover. Accart adopted the example of the RAF, which “rested” its pilots by means of regular high-command postings.<sup>10</sup> After a first wound on 12 May 1940, Accart received a second, more serious one (a bullet between the eyes<sup>11</sup>) which saw him admitted to the Édouard Herriot hospital in Lyon on 1 June 1940.
- 9 He took advantage of his four-month convalescence to write *Chasseurs du ciel* (Hunters in the Sky, published in 1941) in order to combat the idea that the air force had not fought and was responsible for the defeat. This book was written in a context where the myth of the 1,000 victories was forged to face the Riom trial of 1941, a trial that threatened the air force with disappearance. In this book, Accart explained that the organisation of the air force, scattered over the territory and subject to a two-headed organisation (air force and army air force), did not allow it to cover a 250 km front. His analysis of the defeat was extended in a second book, *On s'est battu dans le ciel* (“We fought in the sky”) published in 1942. He studied the defeat of the French armies, concluding that control of the sky was a necessary prerequisite for any conflict and received the *Aéroclub de France* prize. This new book, which he wrote to popularise air power, made Accart a profile with potential and a choice recruit for Vichy propaganda, but also for a French air force threatened with extinction. Accart, the 4<sup>th</sup> Ace of the Battle of France, thus represented a credible defender of the airmen’s cause. As a result, the Vichy air force kept him active through an assignment as staff officer of the Southern Air

Defence Sector in November 1940, then as commander of the fighter section at the Salon air school in October 1941. After these postings as an air defence specialist, he was demobbed in December 1942 and placed on armistice leave in March 1943. He briefly worked in an archive in Toulouse, a position that allowed him to escape through Spain to French North Africa (AFN) in December 1943.

### **1. 3. Continuing the fight in an Anglo-American environment**

- 10 Arriving in French North Africa to resume the fight, he was assigned as commander of the 2/2 Berry fighter group. In January 1944, his GC was transferred to Great Britain to join the Free French Air Force. After a compulsory period at the [Royal] Patriotic School in London,<sup>12</sup> he was promoted to commander and took over the 345th Squadron in Brighton, which took part in the air defence of England under the orders of the Fighter Command, the command that had won the Battle of Britain. There he acquired British know-how in air defence, which was to be useful for the rest of his career and for the future development of the air defence command of the territory after the Liberation. He also learnt the importance of high-level logistics in order to be able to mass in the air battle. He used this feedback from operations by joining the General Staff's "war education study" commission in November 1944.
- 11 In his 1944 report, General Valin described him as "exceptional", "appreciated by the Allies" and "the type of profile that should be encouraged".<sup>13</sup> This opinion is reminiscent of the career that awaited Accart in the upper echelons of the air force and his future activities within NATO.<sup>14</sup> This was why Valin decided to send him to the United States in 1945 for an internship at the Command and General Staff School in order to prepare for his future career. There he developed an interest in the Anglo-American way of conceiving air warfare, in particular their tactical and strategic visions which heralded the Cold War. This six-month stay also gave him the organisational tools necessary for his move to the air force staff to participate in the reconstruction of the institution.

## 2. The post-war period or the launch of a career as a commander

### 2. 1. The general staff years, a neo-Douhetian period

- 12 On his return to France, Accart took up various staff positions, first in the “Plans” office of the General Air Staff, then in the General Inspection of the Air Force. However, it was his next assignment, in 1946, that revealed Accart’s main intellectual work. He was appointed professor at the *Centre d’enseignement supérieur aérien* (CESA) and used this period to actively publish various studies on air power. He published regularly in the magazine *Forces aériennes françaises*, on technical and doctrinal subjects, as well as on questions of air strategy.<sup>15</sup> He was published alongside thinkers of his time such as Rougeron, Chassin, Gallois, and Dowding (the architect of British air defence during the Second World War). During his stay at the CESA, Accart fully adhered to the discourse of its director, General Gérardot: in addition to the constant quest to improve the general culture of officers, the CESA had to encourage “the taste for study and personal reflection among air officers to fight against conformism and intellectual laziness”.<sup>16</sup> Thanks to his love of reading and writing, Accart would continue to write for the magazine *Forces aériennes françaises* on various subjects throughout his career, with a definite bias towards air defence.
- 13 In addition to his recurrent contributions to policy debates within the institution, Accart completed his argumentation with the publication of a new book, *Car la terre est ronde* (“For the world is round”), in 1947. This book of about 100 pages constituted an interesting summary of Accart’s intellectual progress. The book began with a geopolitical analysis of the world marked by the influence of British (Mackinder) and German (Hauschofer) geopolitics.<sup>17</sup> In particular, he wrote that a confrontation between the two great world powers seemed highly likely, especially in the North Pole region (what he calls the “polar strategy”). In his view, the newly created UN represented a sig-

nificant mediator for regulating the future of international relations. His geopolitical reading no longer saw French North Africa as a priority because this region was far removed from global priorities. This was in total contradiction with a large part of the military of his time who considered the empire as a reservoir of men and as a fallback base to prepare a landing in case of a new invasion of the metropolitan territory. Finally, Germany should no longer be designated as a “hereditary enemy”, which meant that its occupation should cease as soon as possible.<sup>18</sup> In this context, France, which did not have the means to build a massive army capable of opposing the Soviets, had to avoid taking sides with one of the two powers and seek a “friendly neutrality towards both blocs”.<sup>19</sup> This neutrality had to be accompanied by sufficient defensive means in number, but above all in quality. Here Accart adopted the Anglo-American approach that gave priority to advanced weaponry to compete with the Soviet mass weaponry. This attraction for technology had to be materialised by an arsenal of jets, rockets, remote-controlled devices and finally atomic bombs. Given the economic situation in France at the end of the war, Accart envisaged rationalising resources by harmonising military efforts at the joint armed forces level in order to avoid a situation where three separate armies were competing for additional funds. Emphasis had to be placed on air and anti-aircraft capabilities,<sup>20</sup> supplemented by “new weapons” to form a deterrent military apparatus<sup>21</sup> that would make the cost of occupying France prohibitive for a potential aggressor.

14 It is important to note that the opinions developed in his various writings are particularly opposed to the visions of the National Defence General Staff (*état-major de la Défense nationale*, EMDN). This joint body responsible for rebuilding defence and armies after the war was entrusted to Juin, who argued in favour of an army model that gave pride of place to large armoured and mechanised ground units, to which the air force should only provide tactical support. At the opposite end of the intellectual spectrum, Accart was part of a neo-Douhetian, modern and reformist trend that was promoted by part of the air force during these years.<sup>22</sup> It is therefore logical that he participated in the work on the provisional instruction on the use of air forces (*L'instruction provisoire sur l'emploi des forces aériennes*) published in 1947.<sup>23</sup> This policy doctrine document firmly established



the opposition between the airmen and the EMDN, as the air force unilaterally declared its refusal to be confined to a role of cooperative aviation, preferring the “noble” missions of air superiority and strategic bombing. Accart shared this view while rejecting the idea that the bomber would always get through against the enemy’s air defence, provided it was sufficiently modern. It was in this frame of mind that he was also one of the drafters of the *Règlement de manœuvre de l’aviation de chasse matériel type 1945* (“Manoeuvring rules for type 1945 fighter aircraft”, published in 1946) which sees air-space control as the priority of aviation.<sup>24</sup>

- 15 Accart left the CESA with the rank of lieutenant-colonel and his director, General Gérardot, praised his “popularisation books” and concluded that his type of profile was “to be specially encouraged”.<sup>25</sup> Once his intellectual weapons had been forged, Accart left to test his ideas in operational commands.

## **2. 2. Operational commands, a practical application of military staff teachings?**

- 16 After an assignment as chief of staff at the Army General Staff, Accart went to Brétigny in 1948 where he became deputy director of the Flight Test Centre (CEV) at a time when the aeronautical industry had to be completely rebuilt. There he improved his knowledge of both military and civilian technical issues. The work of the CEV was focused on the approach of the sound barrier, as the French industry of the time was trying to make up for the delay accumulated during the Occupation. The ambition was to build jet fighters of national design, in accordance with the objectives set in 1945 by the Minister of Air, Charles Tillon. This research corresponds to the “supersonic interceptor” that Accart describes in several of his productions, including *Car la terre est ronde*. This is how the first French interceptor prototypes SO.6000 Triton and SO.6020 Espadon of the SNCASO were born, which were not produced in series (because they were too heavy and underpowered) but which had the merit of reviving and modernising the French military aeronautics industry. Promoted to colonel, Accart returned to the bosom of air defence by integrating the *Inspection de la chasse* (“fighter inspection”) where he recommended, as he had done in the RAF, increasing the rate of turnover for all

pilots sent to Indochina in order to avoid fatigue and the decaying of morale.<sup>26</sup>

- 17 His career then took him to NATO from 1952. He first took command of the Reims air base, which he had to rebuild in accordance with the modern requirements of Alliance bases. He also saw the first material, financial and doctrinal contributions from NATO, as the base was home to the F-84s delivered by the United States under the Military Assistance Programme (MAP). He then became 2<sup>nd</sup> deputy chief of staff of the air force in 1955, then *chargé de mission* to the chief of staff of the air force in 1957. This period was technically rich since it corresponded to the development of high-performance fighters such as the *Mirage III*, the construction of a radar network that aimed to cover the entire national territory, as well as the progressive automation of detection and control capabilities (STRIDA system). These two assignments led him to work again on the reconstruction of air defence, and in this capacity, he was the national air defence representative at SHAPE. These years reinforced his belief in collective air defence as they marked the first major advances in NATO's air defence efforts. Alliance members began to link up their detection and control capabilities, allowing them to "see" further. Similarly, the European fleets benefited from NATO support (deliveries under the MAP and the completion of national programmes financed by offshore contracts, such as the French *Ouragan* from 1954 onwards), which swelled the overall volume of interceptors to be used against Soviet forces. It was in this context that SHAPE proposed to the members of the Atlantic Alliance to integrate their air defence assets, which the French government categorically refused in 1954. Accart, in the light of his experience and his links with NATO, was at least in favour of an integration of ground means, a process that had already partially begun since the French detection network was linked to the allied network, notably via the Drachenbronn station. Summoned by de Gaulle back in power, he did not convince the President of the Republic to integrate the active means (the fighters), the latter refusing to place the French air forces in the hands of "some General Norstadt"<sup>27</sup> (the American general at the head of SHAPE) for him to send them into a forward battle that would be lost in advance.<sup>28</sup> In a symbol of Accart's failure, France clarified its position on air defence on 10 August 1960. In a letter addressed to SACEUR, the French govern-

ment rejected any opening of fire of the French air defence forces that had not been authorised by Paris, which sounded the death knell for the integration of active means. Appointed air brigadier general, Accart continued his NATO career within integrated units by taking over the 1<sup>st</sup> Tactical Air Command (1<sup>st</sup> CATAC) and the French Air Force in Germany in November 1960. This experience finally convinced him of NATO's contributions, as the units he commanded were particularly rich, well equipped and capable of taking off at any time on permanent alert. It was these qualities that Accart intended to transpose to the entire air force and more particularly to the air defence command of the territory (then the air command of the air defence forces as of 1961), and this as of peacetime.

- 18 The end of his career in the air force was divided between the *Conseil supérieur de l'Air* (from 1962 to 1965) and a position as inspector of armament programmes and manufacturing (1963). There, he refined his knowledge of new equipment (notably computers, due to the automation of French air defence) while participating in the major strategic choices of the air force. Noting the imposing cost of nuclear power, which reduced the potential of conventional forces, he wished above all to extend the life of the *Mirage* IVs tasked with the nuclear mission from 1964 onwards. This extension was supposed to gain time for the entry into service of the maritime component, and above all to postpone the development of SSBS missiles, which he considered too expensive and too static, making them vulnerable because they attracted the “enemy’s lightning”. In disagreement with his superiors, he left the active army in 1965 to join NATO and more particularly to take charge of the NATO Air Defence Ground Environment (NADGE) project.

## **2. 3. Accart, a supporter of integrated air defence?**

- 19 In 1965, the year he was admitted to the 2<sup>nd</sup> section, Accart turned to a career as a lobbyist for the Atlantic Alliance. He advocated the integration of air defence resources to the Minister of Defence at the time (Pierre Messmer), then to the President of the Republic (de Gaulle). Once again summoned by the latter, he pleaded the cause of NADGE, which represented the beginning of an integrated air de-

fence, since it was a single surveillance system deployed on a European scale. This approach should be seen in the context of the French-NATO disagreement over the refusal to integrate French air defence means, which had been going on since 1954 and which was revived by the return of General de Gaulle to power, despite the Puget-Norstadt agreements of 1961, which aimed at normalising French autonomy in air defence. This matter ended in 1966 and led to the withdrawal of Paris from the integrated command of NATO. Accart therefore had to convince the Chief of the Armed Forces to leave part of the French air force in close contact with NATO, while the latter rejected any provision of French resources under the orders of an American general from SHAPE who would have the power to drag France into a world conflict. It was during this meeting in 1965 that de Gaulle informed him that France would distance itself from NATO and tried to convince him to leave the NADGE project. Yet, Accart came out of this meeting with the agreement of the Head of State to finance the NATO project up to the equivalent of 11 per cent (i.e., as much as the United Kingdom which was a particularly active member of the Alliance).<sup>29</sup>

- 20 As he humorously notes in his oral testimony, “the largest NATO project was directed by a French general”,<sup>30</sup> while France left the integrated NATO command in 1966. Accart embodied the problems that NATO represented for French air defence as he joined even as the government distanced itself from the Alliance. Like many airmen, he was convinced of the technical contributions of the Alliance. The Alliance was indeed a major support, whether materially, organisationally, in terms of doctrine or financially. His time at the head of large integrated units (1<sup>st</sup> CATAC and the French Air Force in Germany in 1960, commander of the Tactical Air Force in 1962) allowed him to see the great wealth of these commands, which had complete squadrons with recent and well-equipped resources, often of American design. These units were able to multiply their training sessions in order to have quality personnel. They therefore embodied the modern and well-equipped air force, i.e. the model for which he had been campaigning for many years. They also broke with the “survival” model imposed by the Algerian war, which consumed a large part of the personnel and means, and which above all maintained the air force in a counter-insurgency logic that was not compatible with the require-

ments of the European theatre. For Accart, the NADGE project was a response to one of the challenges of modern air warfare in Europe that France could not finance alone, namely the problem of long-range detection. Indeed, the appearance of increasingly faster fighters and bombers with increasingly destructive weapons required detection as far away from the country's territory as possible. Faced with the range of the radars of the time, the most rational solution consisted in linking the French surveillance network with that of its NATO allies. This network of radars stretched from Norway to Turkey so as to cover the entire airspace of the members of the Atlantic Alliance. These radar networks were connected in a single system to provide warning and control of active air defence assets (aircraft and missiles). While the technical and financial challenge was certain, this project provided a concrete solution to the cooperation needs expressed by the Alliance's national air defences, including by French airmen, of which Accart was a part. Indeed, it was not uncommon to see the air force personnel of the time arguing in favour of advanced cooperation with NATO, or even pure and simple integration. This was true for detection and control means as well as for other capability gaps. This was the case, for example, for ground-air defence: as the French industry was unable to produce its own systems before the end of the 1960s, the air force had no choice but to equip itself with American Nike and Hawk systems.

- 21 Despite Accart's conviction of the Alliance's contributions, he kept in mind the imperative need to preserve national independence militarily and diplomatically. Convinced of this strategic imperative in most of his writings, he intended to apply this autonomy to air defence, since the latter was the responsibility of the State and a symbol of national sovereignty in the face of the great powers of the Cold War. In a way, his words written in *Car la terre est ronde* in 1947 make sense: France, not wishing to take sides with one of the two great powers, had to maintain its neutrality by means of a credible and autonomous defence apparatus.<sup>31</sup> However, Accart did not see this autonomy as a form of isolationism. He even described the NADGE as a way of building "a bit of Europe"<sup>32</sup> insofar as it was a collective achievement between European countries with successful industrial cooperation, for example between the industrialists *Telefunken* (Federal Republic of Germany), *Marconi* (Italy) and *Thompson* (France).



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29 From the air battles conducted between September 1939 and June 1940, Accart retained the advantage conferred by the repetition of training: in addition to superiority over the enemy, it also made it possible to increase flight safety, a theme that was dear to him throughout his career in the institution. Noting that his group suffered more casualties from accidents than from combat, Accart believed that this was due to the temperature and pressure variations associated with high-altitude flights, which tired the pilots who were already exhausted from having been kept on alert throughout the “phoney war” with little staff turnover. Accart adopted the example of the RAF, which “rested” its pilots by means of regular high-command postings.<sup>10</sup> After a first wound on 12 May 1940, Accart received a

second, more serious one (a bullet between the eyes<sup>11</sup>) which saw him admitted to the Édouard Herriot hospital in Lyon on 1 June 1940.

- 30 He took advantage of his four-month convalescence to write *Chasseurs du ciel* (Hunters in the Sky, published in 1941) in order to combat the idea that the air force had not fought and was responsible for the defeat. This book was written in a context where the myth of the 1,000 victories was forged to face the Riom trial of 1941, a trial that threatened the air force with disappearance. In this book, Accart explained that the organisation of the air force, scattered over the territory and subject to a two-headed organisation (air force and army air force), did not allow it to cover a 250 km front. His analysis of the defeat was extended in a second book, *On s'est battu dans le ciel* ("We fought in the sky") published in 1942. He studied the defeat of the French armies, concluding that control of the sky was a necessary prerequisite for any conflict and received the *Aéroclub de France* prize. This new book, which he wrote to popularise air power, made Accart a profile with potential and a choice recruit for Vichy propaganda, but also for a French air force threatened with extinction. Accart, the 4<sup>th</sup> Ace of the Battle of France, thus represented a credible defender of the airmen's cause. As a result, the Vichy air force kept him active through an assignment as staff officer of the Southern Air Defence Sector in November 1940, then as commander of the fighter section at the Salon air school in October 1941. After these postings as an air defence specialist, he was demobbed in December 1942 and placed on armistice leave in March 1943. He briefly worked in an archive in Toulouse, a position that allowed him to escape through Spain to French North Africa (AFN) in December 1943.

### **1. 3. Continuing the fight in an Anglo-American environment**

- 31 Arriving in French North Africa to resume the fight, he was assigned as commander of the 2/2 Berry fighter group. In January 1944, his GC was transferred to Great Britain to join the Free French Air Force. After a compulsory period at the [Royal] Patriotic School in London,<sup>12</sup> he was promoted to commander and took over the 345th Squadron in Brighton, which took part in the air defence of England under the orders of the Fighter Command, the command that had won the Battle

of Britain. There he acquired British know-how in air defence, which was to be useful for the rest of his career and for the future development of the air defence command of the territory after the Liberation. He also learnt the importance of high-level logistics in order to be able to mass in the air battle. He used this feedback from operations by joining the General Staff's "war education study" commission in November 1944.

- 32 In his 1944 report, General Valin described him as "exceptional", "appreciated by the Allies" and "the type of profile that should be encouraged".<sup>13</sup> This opinion is reminiscent of the career that awaited Accart in the upper echelons of the air force and his future activities within NATO.<sup>14</sup> This was why Valin decided to send him to the United States in 1945 for an internship at the Command and General Staff School in order to prepare for his future career. There he developed an interest in the Anglo-American way of conceiving air warfare, in particular their tactical and strategic visions which heralded the Cold War. This six-month stay also gave him the organisational tools necessary for his move to the air force staff to participate in the reconstruction of the institution.

## **2. The post-war period or the launch of a career as a commander**

### **2. 1. The general staff years, a neo-Douhetian period**

- 33 On his return to France, Accart took up various staff positions, first in the "Plans" office of the General Air Staff, then in the General Inspection of the Air Force. However, it was his next assignment, in 1946, that revealed Accart's main intellectual work. He was appointed professor at the *Centre d'enseignement supérieur aérien* (CESA) and used this period to actively publish various studies on air power. He published regularly in the magazine *Forces aériennes françaises*, on technical and doctrinal subjects, as well as on questions of air strategy.<sup>15</sup> He was published alongside thinkers of his time such as Rougeron,

Chassin, Gallois, and Dowding (the architect of British air defence during the Second World War). During his stay at the CESA, Accart fully adhered to the discourse of its director, General Gérardot: in addition to the constant quest to improve the general culture of officers, the CESA had to encourage “the taste for study and personal reflection among air officers to fight against conformism and intellectual laziness”.<sup>16</sup> Thanks to his love of reading and writing, Accart would continue to write for the magazine *Forces aériennes françaises* on various subjects throughout his career, with a definite bias towards air defence.

- 34 In addition to his recurrent contributions to policy debates within the institution, Accart completed his argumentation with the publication of a new book, *Car la terre est ronde* (“For the world is round”), in 1947. This book of about 100 pages constituted an interesting summary of Accart’s intellectual progress. The book began with a geopolitical analysis of the world marked by the influence of British (MacKinder) and German (Hauschofer) geopolitics.<sup>17</sup> In particular, he wrote that a confrontation between the two great world powers seemed highly likely, especially in the North Pole region (what he calls the “polar strategy”). In his view, the newly created UN represented a significant mediator for regulating the future of international relations. His geopolitical reading no longer saw French North Africa as a priority because this region was far removed from global priorities. This was in total contradiction with a large part of the military of his time who considered the empire as a reservoir of men and as a fallback base to prepare a landing in case of a new invasion of the metropolitan territory. Finally, Germany should no longer be designated as a “hereditary enemy”, which meant that its occupation should cease as soon as possible.<sup>18</sup> In this context, France, which did not have the means to build a massive army capable of opposing the Soviets, had to avoid taking sides with one of the two powers and seek a “friendly neutrality towards both blocs”.<sup>19</sup> This neutrality had to be accompanied by sufficient defensive means in number, but above all in quality. Here Accart adopted the Anglo-American approach that gave priority to advanced weaponry to compete with the Soviet mass weaponry. This attraction for technology had to be materialised by an arsenal of jets, rockets, remote-controlled devices and finally atomic bombs. Given the economic situation in France at the end of the war, Accart

envisaged rationalising resources by harmonising military efforts at the joint armed forces level in order to avoid a situation where three separate armies were competing for additional funds. Emphasis had to be placed on air and anti-aircraft capabilities,<sup>20</sup> supplemented by “new weapons” to form a deterrent military apparatus<sup>21</sup> that would make the cost of occupying France prohibitive for a potential aggressor.

35 It is important to note that the opinions developed in his various writings are particularly opposed to the visions of the National Defence General Staff (*état-major de la Défense nationale*, EMDN). This joint body responsible for rebuilding defence and armies after the war was entrusted to Juin, who argued in favour of an army model that gave pride of place to large armoured and mechanised ground units, to which the air force should only provide tactical support. At the opposite end of the intellectual spectrum, Accart was part of a neo-Douhetian, modern and reformist trend that was promoted by part of the air force during these years.<sup>22</sup> It is therefore logical that he participated in the work on the provisional instruction on the use of air forces (*L'instruction provisoire sur l'emploi des forces aériennes*) published in 1947.<sup>23</sup> This policy doctrine document firmly established the opposition between the airmen and the EMDN, as the air force unilaterally declared its refusal to be confined to a role of cooperative aviation, preferring the “noble” missions of air superiority and strategic bombing. Accart shared this view while rejecting the idea that the bomber would always get through against the enemy's air defence, provided it was sufficiently modern. It was in this frame of mind that he was also one of the drafters of the *Règlement de manœuvre de l'aviation de chasse matériel type 1945* (“Manoeuvring rules for type 1945 fighter aircraft”, published in 1946) which sees air-space control as the priority of aviation.<sup>24</sup>

36 Accart left the CESA with the rank of lieutenant-colonel and his director, General Gérardot, praised his “popularisation books” and concluded that his type of profile was “to be specially encouraged”.<sup>25</sup> Once his intellectual weapons had been forged, Accart left to test his ideas in operational commands.

## 2. 2. Operational commands, a practical application of military staff teachings?

- 37 After an assignment as chief of staff at the Army General Staff, Accart went to Brétigny in 1948 where he became deputy director of the Flight Test Centre (CEV) at a time when the aeronautical industry had to be completely rebuilt. There he improved his knowledge of both military and civilian technical issues. The work of the CEV was focused on the approach of the sound barrier, as the French industry of the time was trying to make up for the delay accumulated during the Occupation. The ambition was to build jet fighters of national design, in accordance with the objectives set in 1945 by the Minister of Air, Charles Tillon. This research corresponds to the “supersonic interceptor” that Accart describes in several of his productions, including *Car la terre est ronde*. This is how the first French interceptor prototypes SO.6000 Triton and SO.6020 Espadon of the SNCASO were born, which were not produced in series (because they were too heavy and underpowered) but which had the merit of reviving and modernising the French military aeronautics industry. Promoted to colonel, Accart returned to the bosom of air defence by integrating the *Inspection de la chasse* (“fighter inspection”) where he recommended, as he had done in the RAF, increasing the rate of turnover for all pilots sent to Indochina in order to avoid fatigue and the decaying of morale.<sup>26</sup>
- 38 His career then took him to NATO from 1952. He first took command of the Reims air base, which he had to rebuild in accordance with the modern requirements of Alliance bases. He also saw the first material, financial and doctrinal contributions from NATO, as the base was home to the F-84s delivered by the United States under the Military Assistance Programme (MAP). He then became 2<sup>nd</sup> deputy chief of staff of the air force in 1955, then *chargé de mission* to the chief of staff of the air force in 1957. This period was technically rich since it corresponded to the development of high-performance fighters such as the *Mirage III*, the construction of a radar network that aimed to cover the entire national territory, as well as the progressive automation of detection and control capabilities (STRIDA system). These two assignments led him to work again on the reconstruction of air de-

fence, and in this capacity, he was the national air defence representative at SHAPE. These years reinforced his belief in collective air defence as they marked the first major advances in NATO's air defence efforts. Alliance members began to link up their detection and control capabilities, allowing them to "see" further. Similarly, the European fleets benefited from NATO support (deliveries under the MAP and the completion of national programmes financed by offshore contracts, such as the French *Ouragan* from 1954 onwards), which swelled the overall volume of interceptors to be used against Soviet forces. It was in this context that SHAPE proposed to the members of the Atlantic Alliance to integrate their air defence assets, which the French government categorically refused in 1954. Accart, in the light of his experience and his links with NATO, was at least in favour of an integration of ground means, a process that had already partially begun since the French detection network was linked to the allied network, notably via the Drachenbronn station. Summoned by de Gaulle back in power, he did not convince the President of the Republic to integrate the active means (the fighters), the latter refusing to place the French air forces in the hands of "some General Norstadt"<sup>27</sup> (the American general at the head of SHAPE) for him to send them into a forward battle that would be lost in advance.<sup>28</sup> In a symbol of Accart's failure, France clarified its position on air defence on 10 August 1960. In a letter addressed to SACEUR, the French government rejected any opening of fire of the French air defence forces that had not been authorised by Paris, which sounded the death knell for the integration of active means. Appointed air brigadier general, Accart continued his NATO career within integrated units by taking over the 1<sup>st</sup> Tactical Air Command (1<sup>st</sup> CATAC) and the French Air Force in Germany in November 1960. This experience finally convinced him of NATO's contributions, as the units he commanded were particularly rich, well equipped and capable of taking off at any time on permanent alert. It was these qualities that Accart intended to transpose to the entire air force and more particularly to the air defence command of the territory (then the air command of the air defence forces as of 1961), and this as of peacetime.

39 The end of his career in the air force was divided between the *Conseil supérieur de l'Air* (from 1962 to 1965) and a position as inspector of armament programmes and manufacturing (1963). There, he refined

his knowledge of new equipment (notably computers, due to the automation of French air defence) while participating in the major strategic choices of the air force. Noting the imposing cost of nuclear power, which reduced the potential of conventional forces, he wished above all to extend the life of the *Mirage* IVs tasked with the nuclear mission from 1964 onwards. This extension was supposed to gain time for the entry into service of the maritime component, and above all to postpone the development of SSBS missiles, which he considered too expensive and too static, making them vulnerable because they attracted the “enemy’s lightning”. In disagreement with his superiors, he left the active army in 1965 to join NATO and more particularly to take charge of the NATO Air Defence Ground Environment (NADGE) project.

## **2. 3. Accart, a supporter of integrated air defence?**

- 40 In 1965, the year he was admitted to the 2<sup>nd</sup> section, Accart turned to a career as a lobbyist for the Atlantic Alliance. He advocated the integration of air defence resources to the Minister of Defence at the time (Pierre Messmer), then to the President of the Republic (de Gaulle). Once again summoned by the latter, he pleaded the cause of NADGE, which represented the beginning of an integrated air defence, since it was a single surveillance system deployed on a European scale. This approach should be seen in the context of the French-NATO disagreement over the refusal to integrate French air defence means, which had been going on since 1954 and which was revived by the return of General de Gaulle to power, despite the Puget-Norstadt agreements of 1961, which aimed at normalising French autonomy in air defence. This matter ended in 1966 and led to the withdrawal of Paris from the integrated command of NATO. Accart therefore had to convince the Chief of the Armed Forces to leave part of the French air force in close contact with NATO, while the latter rejected any provision of French resources under the orders of an American general from SHAPE who would have the power to drag France into a world conflict. It was during this meeting in 1965 that de Gaulle informed him that France would distance itself from NATO and tried to convince him to leave the NADGE project. Yet, Accart



came out of this meeting with the agreement of the Head of State to finance the NATO project up to the equivalent of 11 per cent (i.e., as much as the United Kingdom which was a particularly active member of the Alliance).<sup>29</sup>

- 41 As he humorously notes in his oral testimony, “the largest NATO project was directed by a French general”,<sup>30</sup> while France left the integrated NATO command in 1966. Accart embodied the problems that NATO represented for French air defence as he joined even as the government distanced itself from the Alliance. Like many airmen, he was convinced of the technical contributions of the Alliance. The Alliance was indeed a major support, whether materially, organisationally, in terms of doctrine or financially. His time at the head of large integrated units (1<sup>st</sup> CATAC and the French Air Force in Germany in 1960, commander of the Tactical Air Force in 1962) allowed him to see the great wealth of these commands, which had complete squadrons with recent and well-equipped resources, often of American design. These units were able to multiply their training sessions in order to have quality personnel. They therefore embodied the modern and well-equipped air force, i.e. the model for which he had been campaigning for many years. They also broke with the “survival” model imposed by the Algerian war, which consumed a large part of the personnel and means, and which above all maintained the air force in a counter-insurgency logic that was not compatible with the requirements of the European theatre. For Accart, the NADGE project was a response to one of the challenges of modern air warfare in Europe that France could not finance alone, namely the problem of long-range detection. Indeed, the appearance of increasingly faster fighters and bombers with increasingly destructive weapons required detection as far away from the country’s territory as possible. Faced with the range of the radars of the time, the most rational solution consisted in linking the French surveillance network with that of its NATO allies. This network of radars stretched from Norway to Turkey so as to cover the entire airspace of the members of the Atlantic Alliance. These radar networks were connected in a single system to provide warning and control of active air defence assets (aircraft and missiles). While the technical and financial challenge was certain, this project provided a concrete solution to the cooperation needs expressed by the Alliance’s national air defences, including by French

airmen, of which Accart was a part. Indeed, it was not uncommon to see the air force personnel of the time arguing in favour of advanced cooperation with NATO, or even pure and simple integration. This was true for detection and control means as well as for other capability gaps. This was the case, for example, for ground-air defence: as the French industry was unable to produce its own systems before the end of the 1960s, the air force had no choice but to equip itself with American Nike and Hawk systems.

42 Despite Accart's conviction of the Alliance's contributions, he kept in mind the imperative need to preserve national independence militarily and diplomatically. Convinced of this strategic imperative in most of his writings, he intended to apply this autonomy to air defence, since the latter was the responsibility of the State and a symbol of national sovereignty in the face of the great powers of the Cold War. In a way, his words written in *Car la terre est ronde* in 1947 make sense: France, not wishing to take sides with one of the two great powers, had to maintain its neutrality by means of a credible and autonomous defence apparatus.<sup>31</sup> However, Accart did not see this autonomy as a form of isolationism. He even described the NADGE as a way of building "a bit of Europe"<sup>32</sup> insofar as it was a collective achievement between European countries with successful industrial cooperation, for example between the industrialists *Telefunken* (Federal Republic of Germany), *Marconi* (Italy) and *Thompson* (France). However, he remained lucid about the role to be played by the United States in European air defence: while he proposed the installation of battery radars in the valleys to solve the problem of detection in the lower layers, he recognised the effectiveness of the American AWACS solution. Consequently, Accart is fully in line with the rational French vision of air defence practice, which refuses pure and simple integration in favour of an advanced technical cooperation solution.

43 He died on 19 August 1992, shortly after the end of the Cold War. Although the air force gradually moved away from its defensive posture towards the Soviet threat in the East, the NADGE endured over time to become the current NATINADS. The latter has changed in terms of missions and organisation but, because of its origin, it represents a legacy of General Accart that is still operational.

## Conclusion

- 44 In conclusion, a simple observation should be made in this article, namely that General Accart has not been the subject of any scientific work to date, certainly because he remains little known to the general public. This remark can also be made for many airmen. This article intended to explore the career of Jean-Mary Accart through his vision and action in favour of the reconstruction of a modern and efficient air force, through the prism of his operational career. This study focused particularly on the reconstruction of French air defence in the face of the challenges of the Cold War, in the light of the opportunity that NATO represented in this context.
- 45 Nevertheless, General Accart's background and intellectual curiosity gave him the opportunity to deal with much broader technical and strategic issues covering the entire spectrum of the air and military domains. This short biography is intended as an invitation to a much broader and more exhaustive study.

“The general must know how to provide his men [...] with all the material necessary for war.”

Socrates<sup>33</sup>

## NOTES

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## RÉSUMÉS

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### English

Considered as a "sparkling character", a "man of culture" and a "humanist", and with a brilliant career the *général de corps aérien* Jean-Mary Accart distinguishes himself by his thoughts on aerial work, which influenced the reconstruction of the French Air Force in the post war period. This Ace of the Battle of France distinguishes himself with a specific vision of what the modern French air defence should be in the NATO era. Jean-Mary Accart's work can be studied through the mark he has left behind in the archives at the *Service historique de la Défense* but also through the different writings that he has produced during his career (on the one hand, his books are midway between testimonies and reflexion on air power, and on the other hand, he also published doctrinal work). This article is an attempt to draw the portrait of a chief whose aim was to provide France with a strong air defence, which is to say an important military and diplomatic tool in the Cold War context.

### Français

Qualifié de « caractère brillant », « cultivé », « humaniste » et ayant réalisé une carrière exemplaire, le général de corps aérien Jean-Mary Accart se

distingue par une pensée du fait aérien qui a pesé dans la reconstruction de l'armée de l'Air d'après-guerre. Cet As de la bataille de France se distingue par sa vision de ce que doit être une défense aérienne française moderne à l'époque de l'OTAN. Jean-Mary Accart s'étudie aussi bien à travers la trace qu'il a laissé dans les cartons d'archives du Service historique de la Défense, qu'à travers les différents écrits qu'il a produits au cours de sa carrière (d'une part, ses livres, qui se situent à mi-chemin entre témoignage et réflexion sur la puissance aérienne, et, d'autre part, ses productions doctrinales). Cet article propose de brosser le portrait d'un chef qui a œuvré pour que la France se dote d'une défense aérienne performante, c'est-à-dire d'un outil militaire et diplomatique important dans le contexte de la guerre froide.

## INDEX

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### Mots-clés

Accart, armée de l'air et de l'espace, seconde guerre mondiale, guerre froide, défense aérienne, France, OTAN, Europe

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Accart, French Air Force, Second World War, Cold War, Air Defence, France, Nato, Europe

## AUTEUR

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### Loris Paoletti

Doctorant en histoire, Centre d'études stratégiques aérospatiales, École pratique des hautes études

[loris.paoletti@gmail.com](mailto:loris.paoletti@gmail.com)