

The French Gendarmerie Special Intervention Group

by Eric Micheletti

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Created in the mid-1970's when terrorism was becoming an international scourge, the GIGN (Groupe d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale - National Gendarmerie Intervention Group) has won worldwide acclaim for the successful way its gendarmes liberated hostages detained in a hijacked Airbus at Marignane airport.

The commanding officer issues operational directives but leaves to his two deputies and group leaders all the freedom they need for their execution. Every man is perfectly suited to his role, and the freshly inducted recruits benefit from the experience of the more seasoned officers. Among other methods for example, the gendarmes are taught to communicate without talking, but use of hand gestures. Everyone stresses the importance of the debriefings they always hold after a mission. During these, each man analyses his thoughts and reactions, commenting on or even criticizing the behavior of his comrades during the action. But this outspokenness pays off, its reward being a successful operation in which countless human lives are saved.

"Our main principle is to postpone the use of firearms until the very last moment" says Commandant (Major) Denis Favier, the commanding officer of GIGN. "Avoiding bloodshed is our prime concern. All the members of the group will go to any lengths to protect life. Oddly our adversaries respect us for this attitude even though they know that we mean business. On one occasion, when we had to intervene to quell a jail riot, the ringleaders ordered the troublesome inmates back to their cells when they heard that we were coming. Besides, terrorists or gangsters know that we are superbly trained and shoot straighter than them. About 60 of our men are top marksmen who can score a bull's eye at 600m. Of course, it has taken years of training and operations to achieve such a high level of proficiency. Usually, it takes about three years to turn a recruit a green recruit into a fully fledged GIG gendarme".

Hand-picked From The Best

Any gendarme wishing to join the intervention unit must have been with the force for at least three years when he applies. Most recruits hail from the Gendarmerie's own riot control units. After obtaining permission from the chief of the corps, the applicant undergoes the annual spring screening tests. If successful, he will tackle the second selection round held at Mondesir base. This test, roughly the same as the commando instructors' obstacle course, includes rappelling, running along a roof climbing up a drain pipe and getting used to tear gas. This is followed by an escape and survival test (to check the reaction of the applicants under stress) and, finally, a confrontation in a padded suit with one of the unit's guard dogs. This is capped by the aggressiveness test in which two candidates are pitted against each other in a boxing bout. Understandably, these fights are sometimes violent but help to select the candidates who because of their superior motivation, will have a better chance of making it with the unit.

"But more importantly", says Adjutant-Chef (warrant officer) Guillemer, chief instructor, "the GIGN gendarme must be a highly skilled marksman, whose shots neutralize rather than kill. Shooting tests have therefore the utmost importance. They are conducted over a 25m range for handguns and 200m for shoulder weapons. In these, the candidate fires 10 rounds and,

needless to say, a good score will be a determining factor for the admission of a candidate"

When this phase is over, GIGN senior officers and group leaders interview the candidates to assess their psychological capacity. On average less than 10% of the original intake is selected for the next round of tests which eventually leads to the award of the GIGN badge.

The happy few - who still have a long way to go before graduating - leave their mother unit and for the next two months, are put through intensive physical training (jogging, self-defense, climbing and swimming). They improve their shooting skills with handguns and shoulder weapons under the careful coaching of instructors who first advise them to get forget everything they've learnt before about the use of firearms. They fire thousands of rounds on the range, and are taught individually and in teams to enter and search buildings. All the while, the tempo steadily increases to give the instructors the opportunity to assess the trainees' motivation under stress. After three months, the applicant receives his personal handgun and FRO-1 sniping rifle. The next six months are devoted to on-the-job training. The fledgling gendarme acquires the basic skills of his trade - overpowering a crazed gunman, quelling a riot, "shadowing" suspects, protecting VIPs and dealing with terrorists. Lucky trainees may be detailed to support a team during an actual intervention.

Finally, the coveted GIGN badge is handed over to the successful graduate during a ceremony attended by all the members of the unit.

To be up to the unit's exacting tasks, a gendarme must be in top physical shape and so must devote considerable time and attention to calisthenics. PT is conducted at individual, team and group level. "Physical fitness is each man's personal responsibility," said Major Favier. "Given the intensity of the men's physical training, it is not possible to have them all in practice together and so, they exercise in the sports hall only when it fits the readiness level of their group. Jogging and muscle building exercises are left to the care of the individual"

In addition the gendarmes are encouraged to be proficient with most martial arts such as English, Thai or American boxing, self defense and Krav Maga. As befits any intervention unit, special emphasis is placed on shooting. GIGN gendarmes train daily at the firing hall, (15, 25 and 50m ranges) which they may attend as they wish, and expand several boxes of ammunition which is available on request. "Only accuracy matters," said Laurent, a sniper, who joined the unit in 1992 and who intervened in the Marignane affair with his FRF-1. "On average, each man fires 100 rounds every day." The British SAS who are known to be chary of praise - and who have achieved an unprecedented level of proficiency in counter- terrorism action - regard the GIGN as one of the world's top shooting schools. This is further demonstrated by the number of foreign anti-terrorist groups who, wishing to acquire an equivalent level of marksmanship, attend the GIGN shooting school to improve their skills.

Evolved by Commandant Prouteau, the founder of GIGN, the training method has been improved since by GIGN top shooting experts. Team training is preferably conducted when the men are on full standby. These exercises take place at Mondesir base and include house entry and securing, followed by an explosive/armament course and insertion methods such as air assault and rappelling down from Puma Helicopter. Training at unit level usually involves more than half the strength of the force and deals mostly with releasing hostages held captive on board a ship or an airliner. As recently shown with the hijack of the Marignane Airbus, seizing and securing objectives of that size calls for substantial manpower.

To be thoroughly conversant with the facets of their craft, GIGN gendarmes undergo a wide array of specialized courses: free-fall and operational jumps at the French Army's Pau airborne training base, fast driving a Satory, scaling cliffs at Cassis on the Mediterranean coast and,

finally, attending a ski course at Chamonix in the French Alps, which is then capped with an arduous mountain trek in snowshoes. Sharpshooters train in long range sniping with the Chasseurs Alpains (alpine rifles) at Barcelonnette. Irrespective of their future role within the unit, all gendarmes acquire basic diving skills at the Gendarmerie's own school at Antibes, followed by an advanced course at the French Navy's St Mandrier facilities.

Airborne, Land and Water Interventions

Totaling five officers and 82 NCOs (all parachute-qualified), GIGN is subdivided into one command cell (commanding officer, deputy and three executive officers), a special detachment (clerical, technical, logistics, maintenance and training staff) mostly made up of former operational groups members (also parachute trained), four operational groups of 15 members each (numbered from one to four) commanded by a field officer and, finally, a four-member evaluation/negotiation cell. Two of the operational groups specialize in underwater interventions and two are made up of free-fallers. Two operational groups are kept on 24-hour standby. The high readiness unit is operational within 30 minutes after the Gendarmerie's Nationale headquarters has requested its intervention.

The four operational groups include the 18 intervention divers from 1 and 2 Groups (GIGN stresses that these men are not combat divers), and the 12 free-fallers serving with 3 and 4 Groups. Even though the divers and the free-fallers belong to the operational groups, they may be used in their specific role only in the course of an anti-terrorist operation as defined in the 'Plans Pirates' (hijack plans) evolve in the 1980's to counter terrorism.

Answering to the deputy commander of the unit, Captain Olivier Kim (aged 29, a St Cry graduate who was commissioned with the LaReole Gendarmerie mobile force being joining GIGN in 1990), the free-fallers jump only in the course of long range interventions to serve as the 'advanced eyes' of the intervention group. The GIGN specialized free-faller teams may also assist military operations and to that effect, maintain close links with 13e RDA, a pathfinder unit specializing in deep reconnaissance based at Diuze in Lorraine. When their intelligence mission is completed, the GIGN free-fallers provide fire support during the assault and back up the main intervention element during the operation.

Because of the nature of the secret missions it is also trained to handle, GIGN is integrated within COS (Commandement de Operations Speciales - Special Operations Command) and, when participating in long range anti-terrorist missions is often called upon to collaborate with 1 RPIMa paras or COFUSCO marines.

Fighting Terrorism on the High Seas

Currently, 18 intervention divers commissioned with the various groups are on the strength of the unit. Proficient with closed circuit diving techniques, these specialists use the Oxygers 57 aqualung, manufactured by Spirotechnique, a bubble free apparatus which cannot be detected from the surface, and which they use for their interventions at sea. Whenever hostages are detained on board a ship, the divers discreetly reach and board their objective, then control the vessel and neutralize the terrorists before freeing the hostages.

"This fits the pattern of anti-terrorist mission usually entrusted to GIGN personnel. However, because of the environment in which missions take place, they can only be brought to a successful end by highly trained specialists," said Captain Jean-Francois Tardy, aged 29, the group's deputy commander since 1992 who was previously commissioned with a Gendarmerie mobile squadron at Tarbes. "In addition to being proficient with diving and swimming techniques with aqualungs, they must be able to board a ship, be it at sea or docked, and

control it. No easy task considering the large number of gangways and decks. To that effect, we practice on various types of boat with the cooperation of the French Navy's unit specializing in interventions on the high seas"

Regularly, GIGN divers conduct exercises to familiarize themselves with the layout of different types of ship so as to work out the best way of boarding and seizing them. The information culled from these exercises is collated and stored for future interventions. Furthermore, French shipping and oil companies put their facilities at the divers' disposal for training purposes. Finally, meetings with staff from other special units give the divers the opportunity to hone their skills and further their experience.

Any gendarme wishing to become a GIGN intervention diver must first attend the course run by the Gendarmerie at its Antibes facilities to obtain the basic qualification (the curriculum is practically the same as that for French Navy's divers). The candidate then trains at the St Mandrier combat diver school. Tuition is shorter (lasting five weeks instead of 11) as GIGN divers have no use for offensive combat skills such as attaching shipping or minelaying. Harbor exploration is only scantily covered as it is one of the groups divers' secondary assignments.

The initial phase of the curriculum focuses on the use of the Ox-57 aqualung with which the trainee must become thoroughly proficient. He then learns to surface discreetly, cut his way through a torpedo net, establish a PROAT (projet d'attaque - attack plan), navigate under water (always in two-man teams), dodge underwater charges, dive by night, survey the hull of a ship, and finally, swim exactly 100m in three minutes sharp with a deviation error not exceeding +/- 50

Then, the GIGN intervention divers attend a two-day boat handling course before parachuting over water with the combat divers of Commando Hubert. After the INIT-OXY (oxygen initiation), the trainees are taught to select the most suitable sport from which an attack can be launched and learn to operate in groups underwater (up to six or eight two-man teams). Swimming line abreast, abeam of their objective, the divers train to arrive together under the hull of the ship they have to board. They will then use specific equipment, grapples, poles etc., to climb aboard stealthily (this method is only used when the target ship is docked. Otherwise the men will be inserted by helicopters, particularly for interceptions on the high seas). Rappelling or assault are the two ways the divers most frequently select for this type of intervention. Finally, the divers keep their skills at peak level through attending refresher courses at Antifer in the Channel, at St Malo on the Atlantic coast and in the Mediterranean.

Created in 1983-85 by Captain Barril, the intervention diver unit has kept abreast with the latest techniques, even though it has never had to use them for an actual anti-terrorist operation on the high seas. However, GIGN and a marine commando unit are the only French units trained to intervene on ships and offshore platforms. It should be borne in mind, however that twice in the recent past, hostage seizures at sea have hit the headlines: first when the liner Achilles Lauro was the target of terrorists on 10 October 1985 and then, when the City of Poros was seized by extremists on 20 July 1988.

Since GIGN came into being, intervention techniques have been constantly updated, even though the gendarmes' main task has remained unchanged: 'physical intervention involving the use of special skills to overcome armed or dangerous criminals.' In other words, they handle the delicate missions which, because of the risks they entail, fall beyond the scope of the Gendarmerie's usual duties. Thus, the GIGN tackles desperate assignments involving hostage seizures (criminal and political), holed up gunmen and barricaded criminals. They also specialize in tricky jail interventions, particularly quelling riots, in addition to handling the usual police work ranging from surveillance ('shadowing') to helping their Gendarmerie colleagues

arrest dangerous criminals.

So far GIGN has intervened more than 650 times, accounted for the liberation of more than 520 hostages and 550 arrests. In addition to the well publicized way it handed the 26 December 1994 hostage crisis at Marignane, GIGN is often called upon to intervene to overcome crazed gunmen. These operations are always dicey as, in the words of Major Favier: 'We always have the highest consideration for human life. Our foe is always dealt with fairly- whatever offense he may have committed.'

GIGN gendarmes have twice put into application the anti-terrorist techniques they worked out after Palestinians murdered Israeli athletes at Munich during the 1972 Olympic Games. The first time was at Djibouti in 1976 and just recently at Marseille-Marignane. Always difficult to carry out successfully because of the careful planning and faultless execution they require, these actions can be likened to military operations. As shown during the Ouvea Cave assault, the foe is often staunchly determined to fight it out to the finish.

Criminal Investigations

As befits other Gendarmerie units, GIGN is often called upon to assist with criminal investigations. The 'Gendarmarie Nationale' is a pillar of the French judicial system and so, along with their colleagues from other branches, the 'super gendarmes' lend their support to criminal investigations at section and brigade levels. In the course of these duties, they are mainly tasked with locating, 'shadowing' and arresting wanted criminals in France and French-controlled territories. The arrest of wanted Basque separatists ranks among the most celebrated actions carried out by GIGN gendarmes in the course of their struggle against crime.

For more than five years, gendarmes from the elite unit stalked terrorists from the underground organizations, iparretatak and ETA (Euakadi ta Askatusana - Basque Fatherland and Liberty). In May 1988, a wanted separatist called Bidart was arrested at Le Baugeau after a long search during which the gendarmes spent 10 days hiding near the house where the terrorist was living. Then in November 1992, three Basque bombers were arrested at Dax as they were about to plant an explosive charge. Before they could make a move, the three men were overpowered in a busy street by GIGN gendarmes. Later, police discovered that they were armed with P-38 (mm handguns).

The next year, in July, Spanish born ETA militant Jose Olascoaga was also nabbed by the gendarmes during a sweep. Further to these operations, the gendarmes participate in the relentless struggle against drug traffickers, forgers and bank robbers. For these missions, the agents usually operate in plain clothes, grow their hair longer than regulations permit, and use unmarked cars for discretion.

Negotiations Rather than Violence

GIGN is the only French law enforcing body which boasts its own evaluation/negotiation team (cellule d'evaluation), a privilege it shares with very few other similar units around the world. Acting on a tip usually provided the Gendarmerie's SR (section de renseignement - intelligence section), the cell investigates any offense of a serious criminal nature such as extortion, kidnapping, smuggling etc., to which GIGN may lend its skills. When their intervention is required, GIGN agents first ring up the local Gendarmerie for details for their mission and then, keeping the site of their potential intervention under discreet surveillance, they usually follow this up with the close observation and shadowing of their suspects.

The evaluation/negotiation cell is composed of four men, two of whom are negotiators, who now play an increasingly important part during interventions (negotiators are selected from gendarmes who have been serving for at least six years with GIGN).

Bernard, a 32-year old negotiator who has been with the group for eight years, enlarges on the functions of the cell: 'It was created two years ago after we had closely studied the way similar units operated abroad. We realized that delicate interventions could be brought to a successful end without resorting to the use of violence. We found that even when they failed, negotiations greatly facilitated the task of the intervention teams. Formerly, it was up to the team leader to negotiate with the holed up criminal. It was after the Ouvea affair in New Caledonia that several groups decided to use negotiation to solve crisis and to that effect, attended psychology courses, took part in lifelike role-playing games, and examined closely post action intervention reports to better understand what makes desperate criminals tick. We became convinced that negotiating would help us to overcome them more easily. The first aim of negotiating is to procrastinate. Violence is resorted to when everything else has failed. After first establishing contact with the holed up man, our prime goal is to bring the situation back to its proper perspective through discussion. We then try to calm the man down and obtain the release of the largest number of hostages possible by agreeing with some of his demands. This is often the case when dealing with the leader of the rioting inmates. Biding ones Time and postponing the use of violence until the very last moments are the rules of the game. To that effect we always operate in pairs, a negotiator and his assistant."

Jail Interventions

GIGN is also trained to bring the jail rioters to heel - particularly when hostages are seized - in Gendarmie controlled jails. To facilitate the task of GIGN, a special report on France's largest prisons was drafted by a team led by one of the unit's "old hands" Warrant Officer Jean-Marie Grivel. Grivel selected the most suitable sniping posts and defined the safest way to occupy each prison. GIGN has carried out seven jail interventions since 1975. Several group gendarmes continuously study new ways of improving the techniques used by GIGN (sniping, CQB, parachuting, air & sea terrorism control, negotiating etc.). They pay close attention to what other international teams use as materiel and how they conduct operations.

Armament

GIGN personnel can select from a wide range of weaponry. Handguns: SIG P-228, HK P-7, MR73 .357 revolvers.

Submachine-guns & Assault rifles: Uzi 9mm, HK MP-5 SD, SIG 551 5.56mm & FAMAS 5.56mm.

Rifles and shotguns: Ruger HB 308 7.62mm carbine, Remington 870 12 gauge, Benelli 12 gauge.

Sniping rifles are FR-F1 and 12.7mm Barrett or McMillan.

HK 40mm grenade launchers are used for heavy support.

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