



France's

EPIGN

*Escadron Parachutiste d'Intervention de la
Gendarmerie Nationale*



France's Gendarmerie Nationale contains a number of specialized, elite sub-units. The most famous of these units is the GIGN Counter Terrorist (CT) unit. Another of these units, although less well known, is the Gendarmerie's EPIGN (Escadron Parachutiste d'Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale). Little known outside of France this highly skilled special operations and counter terrorist force routinely operates alongside its more well known counterpart.

Raised in 1971, and known as the EPGM (Escadron Parachutiste de Gendarmerie Mobile), the unit was originally raised to give the Gendarmerie and airborne and special operations capability. Its initial cadre were drawn from Mobile Gendarmie units stationed though out France. The squadron underwent several name changes over the years, before settling with its current designation.

EPIGN Gendarmes have participated in a number of French military interventions over the years. Teams have operated in support of the international peacekeeping forces deployed to the war torn city of Beirut, Lebanon and in July 1987, EPIGN commandos assisted GIGN with riot suppression at the Fleury-Merogis prison near Paris. They have supported French military units operating against Libyan backed opposition forces in Chad. EPIGN teams have been extremely active in Basque territory operating against heavily armed ETA terrorists. EPIGN platoons now operate on a rotational basis though out the Basque countryside.

The French territory of New Caledonia has experienced various periods of unrest over the years. During one such period of unrest, a Gendarmerie station was attacked, and a number of hostages were held. The French government soon dispatched a number of special operations units to deal with the crisis. Amongst them was an EPIGN platoon which operated under the control of GIGN. As a result of this operation and other terrorist acts an EPIGN platoon is now permanently stationed in the territory.

Teams of operators have deployed to many of France's former African colonies, to help quell disturbances and provide protection details to visiting VIPs. In 1994, team of EPIGN operators deployed to Rawanda, along with French airborne and special operations units , to conduct Operation Pelican.

In December of 1994, EPIGN participated in the rescue of hostages from Air France flight 8969. Members of an Algerian terrorist group, known as the Armed Islamic Group, boarded the flight and hijacked the aircraft. GIGN and EPIGN, along with other French special operations assets, were immediately placed on an alert status. Once the aircraft landed in France, the GIGN and EPIGN teams were prepared to storm the aircraft if necessary. French intelligence operatives received word that the terrorist planned to use the aircraft as a gigantic suicide bomb, exploding the plane while in flight over Paris. The decision was made not to let the aircraft liftoff, and the attack order was transmitted. GIGN assault teams stormed the aircraft while EPIGN teams provided support and secured the area around the aircraft. Once the aircraft had been secured EPIGN Gendarmes helped evacuate hostages and wounded

personnel to safety.

In 1997, EPIGN once again deployed to Africa. This time to Brazzaville, in the Congo, to help evacuate French expatriates, and to try to restore some form of order to the Former French colony. In 1998 EPIGN protective details, provided security during the Rambouillet summit convened to bring and ended to the ongoing conflict in the former Republic of Yugoslavia.

Subordinate to the Gendarmerie Nationale's Groupe de Securite et d'Intervention de La Gendarmerie Nationale (GSIGN- the Gendarmerie's special operations and rapid intervention command), the unit is currently commanded by a Captain, and composed of approximately 140 men. The unit is divided into a command section , and four specialized platoons.

The first platoon is the Operational Support section, and is composed of seventeen men. The second and third platoons are the units Security and Protection platoons. Each is composed of two officers and forty NCO's and enlisted troops and specialize in conducting rapid reaction operations, such as NEOs, and VIP protection. They routinely operate alongside of the Groupe de Securite du President de la Republique (GSPR- the French Secret Service). They are responsible for providing the protection details to the French Minister of Defense, and the military's Chief of Staff. Each platoon also contains a small canine and EOD section. One platoon is always on standby for immediate deployment to crisis spots, or terrorist incidents.

The last platoon , which is composed of one officer and thirty-five NCO's and enlisted personnel, is known as the Groupe d'Observation et de Research (GOR), and specializes in conducting surveillance and intelligence gathering missions for the unit. The GOR also contains the units combat swimmer trained personnel.

Prospective EPIGN hopefuls are drawn from the ranks of experienced Gendarmerie personnel, with approximately 70% coming from Mobile Gendarmerie units, 20% from the Republican Guard , and 10% from departmental units. Candidates must have at least five years experience before applying to the unit. Their selection process is identical to the one used to select candidates for airborne and special operations units of the French army. EPIGN training classes are very small, averaging 10 students per session (conducted twice yearly). In addition to their Basic Gendarmerie and airborne training, students attend various specialty courses provided by both the Gendarmerie and the military such as mountaineering, combat medicine, land navigation, communications, advanced weapons handling, defensive driving, and free fall parachuting. Approximately 42 unit members are trained in military free fall techniques (HALO/HAHO), and both the Protection and Security sections and the GOR contain highly trained sniper personnel.

EPIGN's armory is stocked with the best weapons on the open market. The unit is equipped with the HK MP-5 series of submachine guns. GOR operators typically use the SD version when conducting surveillance or recon missions, and the MP-5K model is used by the units close protection details. Pistols consist of the Matra-Manurhin MR-73 .357 revolver, the S & W Chief 60 .38 revolver, Glock 19 and 26 semi-auto pistols. Shotguns used include the modified Remington 870's equipped with Laser Products Sure Fire tac lights and laser aiming devices, Benelli, and Baretta 12 gauges. Rifles include the FAMAS rifle equipped with various night vision and laser aiming devices. Sniper rifles consist of the 7.62mm PGM Commando, the Barret L82A1 and the PGM Hecate .50cal rifles. Heavy weapons support consist of the Belgian 5.56mm Minimi (US M-29), and the HK-69 40 mm grenade launcher.

-Dominique

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