



## The "dead by fire" ceremony a singular Army tradition

LTN (esr) Grenèche Damien

Published on 20/09/2020

Histoire & stratégie

the war memorial at Champerret headquarters, BSPP/BCOM

**The identity of the Paris Fire Brigade is linked to its operational vocation and its historical heritage. A singular military unit with daring values. This identity is expressed through ceremonial and is embodied in traditions. The call of the fire dead is the very expression of the DNA of the Paris firefighter and his motto: "Save or Perish". This ceremonial has several purposes: cult of remembrance, exaltation of the sense of duty, operational vigilance, and esprit de corps. Created in 1881, this (neo)tradition continues today. Far from being a vestige of the past, it evolves and adapts.**

"The Brigade, its esprit de corps, its identity, it will draw from its History, it will draw from its values, the fundamentals that will serve it in the fog... it is the capacity of its leaders to give meaning to action, in the chaos of the unspeakable". Major General Jean-Claude Gallet.

The identity of the Paris Fire Brigade is linked to its operational vocation and its historical heritage. Committing to the BSPP means assimilating its History and bringing it to life through different means. The Brigade is a well-defined social group, with its codes, rites and values. A powerful collective identity comparable to the legionnaires. Solidarity, benevolence, courage, devotion, surpassing oneself, all that the firefighter inherits, makes it live and transmits it. It is therefore a trunk of perennial values. The values of the profession are permanently stated, written, sung, staged in speeches, ceremonies, steles, symbols, and other objects of commemoration. Its heritage reinforces its identity and arouses admiration, pride and cohesion, because the firefighter's imagination and symbolism are deeply imbued in society. This identity is expressed through ceremony and embodied in traditions. Let us now look at the development of this memorial process.

This tradition emanates from the will of Colonel Paris, who has commanded the Regiment since 1879. The latter, in a letter dated 6 July 1880 addressed to the Prefect of the Seine, announced his wish to see marble plaques affixed to the barracks walls, recalling the names of officers and soldiers of the Regiment who died in the exercise of their duties. What are the circumstances that allowed this new tradition to emerge? We can say that it is the conjunction of several events.

The first is the mystification of the fireman. Since 1868, one man has been erected as a hero by Napoleon III: Corporal Thibaut. His name may not mean anything to you, but every firefighter knows him. His name is mentioned throughout his career, from training at the Fort de Villeneuve St-Georges to the various ceremonies. The fame of this character goes through history and is still very much alive today. Why is this? Because he embodies the model that every firefighter must be, he alone illustrates the values of the firefighter: Save or Perish! On August 8, 1868, he is said to have carried out a dozen rescues with his hook ladder, a mythical SP apparatus, at the risk of his life, on the facade of the burning building, thus in full view of onlookers. This event was widely reported by the press at the time, so much so that the Emperor decorated him a week later with the Legion of Honour. From then on, the Paris firefighter was a hero.

The second is the virulent questioning of the military status of the Paris fire brigade that the colonel faces. Notably during the meeting of March 13, 1880, where the elected representatives point out the uselessness of the firemen's armament as well as its purely military organization.

The third was the death of Sapeur Havard during the fire in the Printemps stores on 9 March 1881. He died burnt and buried while his comrades had jumped from the balcony to escape the flames. It was his first battle against the fire, he did not have much seniority, was from the last contingent, and died very young. This tragedy is causing a particular stir in the press. At that moment, Havard was the sixteenth firefighter to die in the fire.

So many elements, so many arguments that weighed in the balance. Thus, the municipal council, at its meeting of July 26, 1881, accepts and votes the credit. The first of these commemorative plaques was placed at Rousseau Barracks on October 22nd. Then, each barracks was endowed with them (19). In his Regimental Order No. 69, Colonel Paris declared: "M. the Minister of War has kindly approved and the town council voted the necessary credit for the erection, in each of the barracks, of a commemorative plaque bearing the names of firemen of all ranks who died in the fire, which is the Regiment's Field of Honour. The members whose names appear on these plaques shall be inscribed at the head of control of the companies to which they belonged, and the following provisions shall be complied with in the future: At all company meetings, after the ringing of the roll call, the sergeant-major will have the armed men carry arms, the soldiers in helmets without arms will perform the military salute, those in kepi will be uncovered. The sergeant-major will call out the names placed at the head of control and the week sergeant will answer "dead on fire".

In addition to the plaques, the call of the dead at fire is introduced. As a result, a singular memorial binomial composed of commemorative objects and a military ceremony was set up at the Paris fire brigade in 1881. In application of the law of 4 April 1873, a war memorial was erected at the Montparnasse cemetery on 4 May 1883. It is an intimate

ceremony since it takes place within the walls of the barracks, where only the guard of the day is present. The same goes for the plaques placed in the barracks, which are rarely visible to the public. This military ceremony is expressed according to a codified ritual: every Monday morning, during the weekly gathering, after the raising of the colours and the marseillaise, the chief of guard states the names of the soldiers and a designated sapper answers "death by fire". This is followed by a minute's silence. Today, the list begins with Sapper Rémy, the first soldier to die in fire in the Brigade era since 1968. Every Monday morning, 26 names ring out in each barracks at the same time. It's a collective communion. The symbols of this ceremony are multiple. This rite participates in the moral training of the firefighter. This rite has several purposes.

The first, obvious, is the cult of remembrance. This is part of the military's doloristic culture: celebrating the dead. Beyond the duty of remembrance, it is a solemn tribute to fallen brothers-in-arms, a testimony of gratitude, an opportunity to immerse oneself in the memory of the Elders, to show oneself worthy of it. It is also a vehicle for the transmission of traditions. We can only notice the temporal linearity of this rite, which is more than a hundred years old.

Let's go back. The second purpose is the notion of moral forces later defined by Foch and Lyautey: a highlighting of the sense of duty and supreme sacrifice magnified by the symbolism of remembrance. The profession of firefighter has a relationship to death in the heroic form that the notion of sacrifice gives it. These victims symbolize the example of duty courageously performed. It is a question of haranguing the courage of the sappers to "attack the fire with a moustache", which, as you will have understood, creates a warm closeness to the flames.

The third, tempers the previous one: it is a reminder of the dangerousness of the job. Calling the dead to the fire has an operational purpose: to maintain the vigilance of the sappers, and the need for daily operational preparation (manoeuvres, etc.). This call reminds everyone of their duty, the values essential to their vocation and their possible sacrifice. The warrior spirit dear to General Bosser.

The fourth and final goal is the esprit de Corps. The call of the dead to fire feeds it. Jean Jaurès used to say: "tradition does not consist in preserving ashes, but in keeping a flame alive". This flame is the identity of the "Paris fire brigade". The notion of collective identity is very present since all the fire stations do it. We always come back to the same reasoning: the fundamentals. Give meaning to commitment, give meaning to action, by drawing on one's heritage.

As you will have understood, this ceremony is not folklore. It is the expression, the result of our motto: Save or Perish, made official in 1941. Let us recall that during the eulogy of Sapper Havard, who died in the fire in 1881, Colonel Paris proclaimed: "the spirit of complete abnegation that honours our bodies and makes us know how to die rather than retreat". This is the origin of our motto. To die rather than to retreat! As soldiers, die rather than give up one's post. The results of rescues carried out on intervention, but also the list of deaths by fire, confirm the relevance of this motto. It characterizes the risks of the profession. But the firefighter must not forget that he has an obligation: to rescue any person in immediate danger of death and that as such, he has a duty to take risks. These values are sung by all SPs.

"I want to SAVE you or PERISH  
This is our motto  
And in our eyes  
The honor of being a fire soldier...  
To save you I even want to defeat the gods.

I will defeat even the gods

We're proud of it and we're shouting it  
Proud to be a Paris fireman!"

Does that call into question this century-old practice? Is this ceremony a source of dissent? We can attest that the impact is not the same on each firefighter. For some young recruits, it is a military custom, "you learn that you have to do it, so you do it, period. For others, it affects the affect. "I knew him well, so when I hear his name, it goes to my gut. However, Father Lacour, Brigade Chaplain, wrote in 1953: "The stone keeps the names but we no longer know why. That is why, for several years now, before the call, a different detailed collection has been read every week. This is why, since 2015, each new recruit, before signing his contract, attends a visit to the memory & tradition space. The aim is to educate and give meaning to their commitment. What is the future of this symbolism? Military traditions, far from being vestiges of the past, are alive and well. However, the integrity of this ceremony has never been questioned by the command. The calling of the dead by fire is part of the traditions of the Paris Fire Brigade. The rite is imprescriptible.

---

**Title :** LTN (esr) Grenèche Damien  
**Author (s) :** LTN (esr) Grenèche Damien  
**Release date** 02/03/2020

---