

PIERRE MALVOISIN

A FIGHTER PILOT WITH L'AVIATION MARITIME FRANÇAISE

BY DAVID MÉCHIN

ON 25 JANUARY 1897, a boy named Pierre Armand was born, in the 17th Paris arrondissement. He does not seem to have been born under a lucky star because he was recorded as 'father unknown' on his birth certificate, which was signed by three witnesses, workers and artisans of the Avenue de Saint-Ouen district. His mother, Modeste Josephine Lepretre, 22-years-old and single, seemed hesitant over regulations towards the child's adoption, which she finally acknowledged on the following 15 February by presenting herself at the town hall of the 17th arrondissement. The little Pierre Lepretre would, however, soon have news of his biological father. On 18 September 1899, M Pierre Joseph Malvoisin, a policeman in the uniform of the city of Paris, acknowledged the child as his at the town hall, in the presence of two of his fellow peacekeepers who signed as witnesses. Pierre now bore the name of his father, who finally married his mother on 3 July 1902. The boy grew up at his parents' home in the capital, at 10 impasse des Lépinettes, in a popular neighbourhood near the Porte de Clichy.

A MARINE AT DIXMUDE

At the age of just 17, Pierre decided to join the Navy, in which he was enlisted a simple Seaman 3rd Class on 10 February 1914. The young recruit was scheduled to embark on a ship, but the war that broke out six months later changed that. The Navy, with more men than it could embark, would quickly allocate available recruits to two regiments of Marine Rifles, created on 7 August 1914, to serve on the ground under the orders of Rear Admiral Pierre Ronarc'h. On 17 August, these regiments began to converge on Paris from the major military ports, to participate in the defence of the capital. The day before, Malvoisin was promoted to Seaman 2nd Class. These very young recruits, who were nicknamed 'the young ladies of Paris', were sent to the Belgian coast to face the enemy, once the Battle of the Marne had been won.

Seaman Pierre Malvoisin, assigned to the 1st Regiment of Marines since September, travelled with his regiment for Antwerp, but the railway was cut in Ghent. The riflemen, engaging with the enemy from 9 to 11 October, retreated to Dixmude on foot, reaching the town on the 15th. German troops attacked the city the next day and furious fighting ensued, the 6000 sailors and 5000 Belgian soldiers facing three German army corps comprising 50000 men. Rear-Admiral Ronarc'h told his men: *The role you have to play*



Malvoisin, probably in 1916, in front of an instructional Maurice-Farman, MFXI 1004. :Baudel, ARDHAN collection

is to save our left wing until reinforcements arrive. Sacrifice yourself. Hold for at least four days. It was during the battle that Pierre Malvoisin was wounded by shrapnel and probably evacuated. The Battle of Dixmude ended on 10 November 1914, when the French marines, who had lost half their strength, retreated behind the Yser River whose banks were then flooded by the Belgians, blocking the German troops until the end of the war.

The Rifle Brigade, now famous, was placed in the trenches in the area around Nieuport, but it was finally dissolved in November 1915 when the German submarine threat led the Navy to adapt by recruiting men for new services to fight the U-Boats, patrol boats, coastal artillery and, soon, Marine Aviation. Pierre Malvoisin, who was promoted on 18 March to the rank of quartermaster (QM) on a temporary basis – the equivalent of a corporal, followed this

movement. While the role of the 1st Regiment of Marines was officially withdrawn on 10 December 1915, he was assigned to a seafront artillery unit in Le Havre. But a squadron of three seaplanes, patrolling the approaches to the port, was formed during April 1916. Seeing the FBAs fly over the coast made a strong impression on the young quartermaster who found himself too inactive.

AVIATION VOLUNTEER

So Pierre volunteered to join Maritime Aviation. His application was accepted in May, and he was posted to the pilot school at Ambérieu in Ain. He trained quickly there and received military pilot's licence No.4215 on 11 August 1916. Selected to pilot a fighter plane, he perfected his skills at the advanced school at Pau during the month of September. At the end of this course for the French Navy, he spent more than two months at the school at Saint-Raphaël, learning how to pilot seaplanes.

It was not until December 1916 that he left the school to be assigned to one of the largest maritime aviation units: Maritime Aviation Centre (CAM) Dunkerque, whose aircraft had patrolled the North Sea since the beginning of 1915. Four separate squadrons were attached to it, two of seaplanes (one for patrol and one for fighters) which were stationed in the port of Dunkerque, plus one squadron of land fighters and another of land bombers based on the Saint-Pol-sur-Mer aerodrome which was shared with three squadrons of the British RNAS, as well as Escadrille VC116 of the AMF.