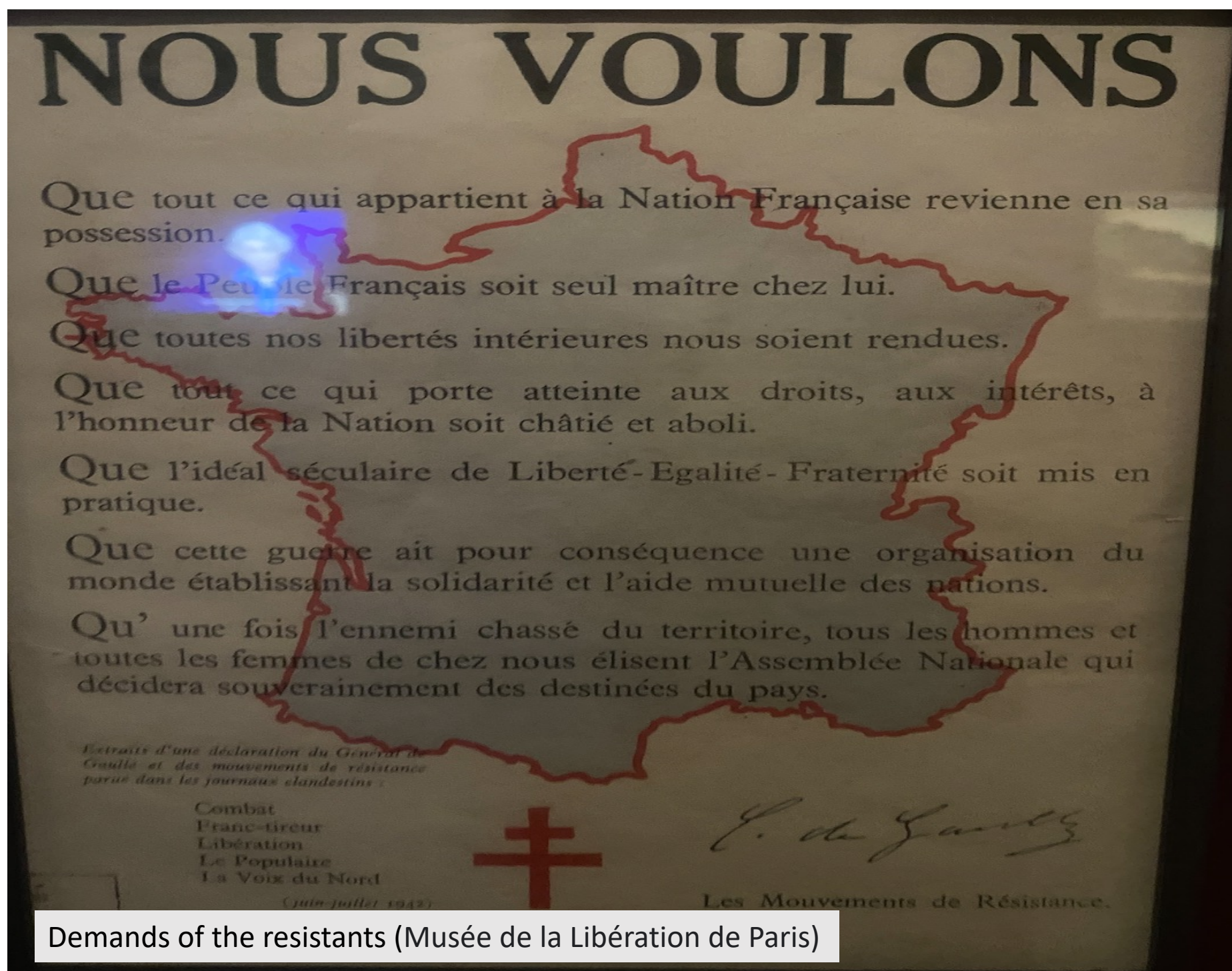


Identifying North Africans in the French Internal Resistance

Introduction:

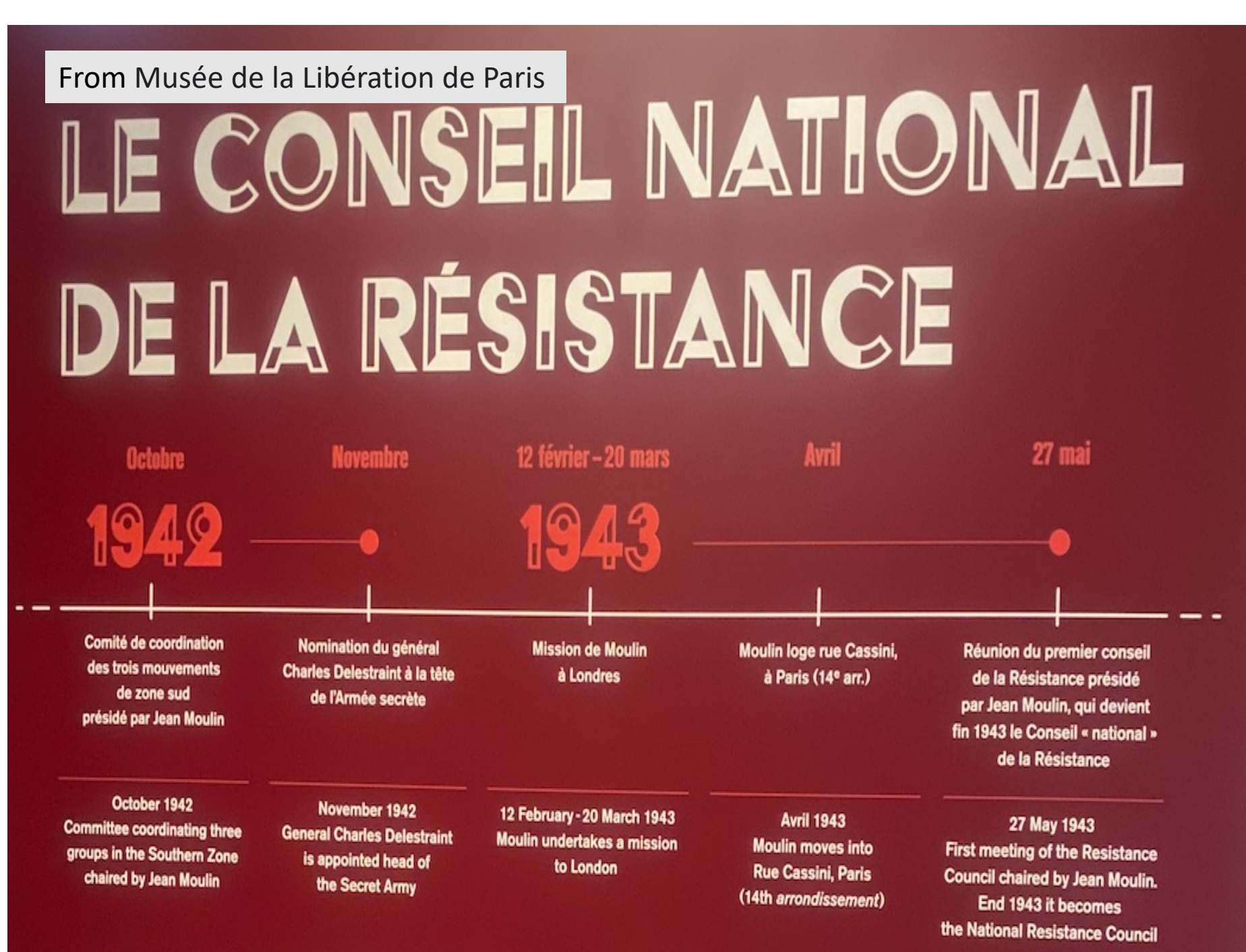
Before starting my research I had to contextualise the issue; France at the time of WWII boasted a large empire having colonised North African countries such as Algeria. Part of the way they aimed to keep the colonies from rebelling was spreading paternalistic ideas that portrayed African people as lesser and unintelligent. Therefore, there was a reluctance to recognise the efforts of soldiers in the French Resistance that originated from the colonies as this made them seem of higher ability and autonomy than what France wanted them to appear as in order to maintain subservience amongst their empire. This damaging, xenophobic and colonial idea has caused issues for historians as there has been a perpetual misunderstanding of the types of people who fought alongside the French against the cruel Nazi, Vichy regime as these North African soldiers were not recognised or celebrated in the narrative of history. My project aimed to build upon previous research by other academics to create a comprehensive database and fact files of these forgotten people. Historians must address the misunderstandings and failures of the past in order to reconcile the disservice done to North African soldiers – This is what my research consisted of doing.



Demands of the resisters (Musée de la Libération de Paris)

Aims and Objectives:

After initial discussions with my supervisor, I was set with some clear aims of how I could meaningfully contribute to this impactful area of research. My primary focus was to research the backgrounds of North African soldiers, recognising the diversity of them in regards to their religions, ages, prior life experiences and which countries that had originated from. I had to draw comparisons between their motivations for joining the resistance and risking their lives for France as well as the ways they may have faced injustice because of their origins. I was tasked with adding to a comprehensive database listing factors such as military achievements, birthplaces, marital status and more. I also had to write individual fact files / short biographies of certain soldiers to allow a degree of humanisation of these men. I needed to avoid just turning their names into a list and instead respecting them as human beings and bringing their stories and experiences to life. This research is partnered with the Fort Mont Valérien in Paris which is a museum and war memorial for resistance fighters. Part of my research was visiting this museum and establishing connections with their team in order to create a way to implement my work in the real world. For me, it became paramount to not just create a piece of research for the sake of academics but also to help memorialise these men as soldiers unlike in the past where they've been disregarded.



Methodology:

With my aims in mind, I had to find ways to find the information about individual soldiers. I used genealogy websites to trace birth records, death records, marriage records etc which allowed me to form timelines of their lives and understand their lives before, after and during the resistance. Often things like marriage certificates would list their employment status which allowed me to see the backgrounds and variety of social statuses these men had come from. I also had to contextualise the information I found for example learning that a man had worked at a University helped me understand how he helped his resistance group to recruit students for their missions. This enabled me to get to know them as people as I could understand the pressures and risks they were taking joining the resistance for example if they had a wife and children. Knowing this information allowed me to understand the dimensions of these people's lives and decisions. I also used databases such as Memoires Des Hommes to attain knowledge of their military backgrounds and years of service in the resistance and whether they were involved in any other conflicts. I also searched alternative sources such as family made memorial sites where some men had passed in later life and their families had created a webpage to remember them. One example was where a man's family had remembered him as being a brave, patriotic man which allowed me to see how much the resistance had meant to him even with all the hindsight of his life. I also had to come up with creative ways to understand these men's lives when often information on them was scarce. At one point I had found the name of somebody that was friends with the soldier I was researching and found a detailed account of his experience in the resistance which allowed me to draw parallels to my research and create a broader picture. I also searched German records from Concentration Camps and prisons where some of my soldiers had unfortunately been sent.



Fort Mont Valérien

Trip to Paris:

A significant part of my research was going to Paris to access the military archives where the individual records of soldiers are kept. These files contained various types of information pertaining to their time in the resistance such as records of arrest, filing for military pensions after the war, letters to and from the soldiers about their experiences, and any other unexpected files. This provided invaluable and I took pictures and kept record of everything I saw in these files so I could examine them through the course of my research. These files ranged from being large and in-depth to frustratingly small and providing no information so I just had to adapt to what I was presented with. I also visited museums in Paris such as the Musée de la Libération de Paris which helped me deepen my knowledge on the resistance as a whole and understand years of significance and turbulence to better contextualise the stories of my soldier's lives.

Challenges:

During my research period, I inevitably came up against challenges to my aims and objectives. One challenge was simply the lack of information on some individuals I was researching. There would often be periods of research where I'd spend the whole time scouring different databases and search engines and coming up with nothing. As well as being disheartening it pushed back my schedule as I could not begin writing biographies about people which I knew nothing about. This lack of information was due often to factors like Algerian records being largely unattainable to the public, disorganised or even non-existent in comparison with very coherent databases like we use in Britain or France. Because of the lack of recognition of North African soldiers, there was often conflicting information where a man could be listed as a low-ranking soldier but other accounts said he was a high rank. This caused me to have to analyse source credibility to high extents and recognise engrained societal bias against certain individuals. It was also difficult to even read some documents due to illegible handwriting or my own knowledge of period specific French vocabulary. As a person whose native language is English with French as their learned language, it was often difficult to translate lengthier, tougher documents.

Results:

The results of my research fulfilled my aims of documenting the lives and experiences of North African soldiers in the French Internal Resistance. I wrote four detailed biographies of specific soldiers, all from Algeria after following extensive trails of their lives. There was a common thread between these men that the resistance had provided them somewhat of a second family, finding comradeship, acceptance and purpose in the folds of fighting. Despite being Algerian, these men also felt a strong French identity. In a reflection piece to conclude my research I wrote;

In some ways it would be wrong to categorise these men as all the same and say that their experiences all fell under the same bracket of a homogenous 'North African' experience whatever that may be. On the face of things there is nothing about the Charles Soussi experience that's the same as the Albert Sadoun experience, after all, these are specific stories of the time, each with their own personalities and motivations. But there are a few things that transpire through all of these men; A love of France and bludgeoning of their abilities due to the perception of people of their race. There is a struggle that weaves itself into all of their experiences whether it comes from the dismissal of their role within the war or whether it's their disproportionately horrific treatment upon capture.

My fact files represented a multitude of personalities, allowing people's personality to be at the forefront of their commemoration. One person I focused on, Emile Sarfati was captured and sent to Buchenwald where he was tortured by the Nazis to a point of severe disability yet in a letter he wrote after the war, he characterised his time in the resistance as a triumph of friendship and spirit. He enjoyed plotting with his friends, supplying false papers to tamper with Nazi missions and simply sharing a cigarette with his fellow soldiers. Another man, Bekhaled Nedjadi characterised a sense of tragedy as the French Government rejected his plea to be recognised and compensated as a Sous-Lieutenant when they wanted to list him as a low-ranking soldier. He embodied the way France disrespected people who had fought ardently for their freedom and reduced them to the perceived characteristics of their race. I also added to a database created by my supervisor to cohesively create a place where these people can be remembered and celebrated in tandem with the work of Mont-Valérien.

088	Mohamed	Ben Amara	21/07/1919	Sous-el-Essa	Tunisia	M	GR16P422755			FFI
089	Mohamed	Ben Amed Ben A	00/00/1892	Biguerra	Morocco	M	GR16P422758			FFI
090	Mohamed	Benbarh	18/05/1919	Taroudant	Morocco	M	GR16P422807			FFI
091	Mohamed	Ben Fedoul	00/00/1903	Douar Houadit	Morocco	M	GR16P422939			FFI
092	Mohamed	Ben Hassen	00/00/1909	Douar Oulad Barail	Morocco	M	GR16P423105			FFI/DIR
093	Mohamed	Ben Marnoun			Tunisia	M	GR16P423122			FFI
094	Mohamed	Ben Meftal	00/00/1929	La Hencha Caidat Djebenliana	Tunisia	M	GR16P423124			FFI
095	Mohamed	Ben Mouha An S	21/07/1917	Douar Ait Nasser	Morocco	M	GR16P423270			FFI
096	Mohamed	Ben Salah	00/00/1917	Douar Ben Chebat Ben Vagna	Tunisia	M	GR16P423349			FFI
097	Mohamed	Ben Thami	00/00/1918	Douar El Khaïta	Morocco	M	GR16P423399			FFI
098	Mohamed	Chad Ahmed	30/06/1905	Milhenia	Algeria	M	GR16P423629			FFI
099	Mohamed	Chad Ahmed	00/00/1919	Douar Reaïna	Algeria	M	GR16P423630			FFI
100	Mohamed	Ben Mouha An S	21/07/1917	Douar Ait Nasser	Tunisia	M	GR16P423270			FFI
101	Mohamed	Aboene Brahim	15/09/1915	El Afroun	Algeria	M	GR16P423708			FFI
102	Mohammed	Ben Mohammed	00/00/1916	Douar Amelour	Morocco	M	GR16P423760			FFI
103	Mokhamed	El Amri	00/00/1914	La Mahessa	Algeria	M	GR16P423760			FFI
104	Mokhad	El Amri	00/00/1900	Tunis	Tunisia	M	GR16P424335			FFI
105	Mokkeddem	Hadi	00/00/1906		Morocco	M	GR16P424347			FFI
106	Mokhebi	Belkacem Jean B	16/11/1911	Le Sourmau	Algeria	M	GR16P424353			FFI
107	Mokhtari	Mohammed	24/04/1912	Tranmam	Algeria	M	GR16P424411			FFI
108	Mokhtari	Said	17/11/1899	Tizi-Ouzou	Algeria	M	GR16P424363			FFI
109	Mokhtari	Octave	09/10/1900	Abrou Ali Belhadi	Algeria	M	GR16P424413			FFI
110	Mokhtarie	Abdella	26/04/1916	Telagh	Algeria	M	GR16P424415			FFI
111	Molima	Emile	15/02/1910	Montaganem	Algeria	M	GR16P424611			FFI
112	Molima	Manuel	06/03/1911	Belstane	Algeria	M	GR16P424618	AC21P59559		FFI/DIR
113	Molima	Joschim	11/12/1924	Sidi-bel-Abbas	Algeria	M	GR16P424825			FFI
114	Mollis	Paul Laurent Josq	16/09/1916	Constantine	Algeria	M	GR16P426121			FFI/DIR
115	Mondon	Alexandre Joseph	20/11/1912	Tunis	Tunisia	M	GR16P425714			FFI
116	Montjo	Paul	24/03/1899	Guelma	Algeria	M	GR16P427255			FFI
117	Monnerville	Felix	12/10/1907	Fort-de-France	Martinique	M	GR16P426513			FFI
118	Monnerville	Gaston Charles F	01/02/1897	Cayenne	Guyana	M	GR16P426514			FFI
119	Montagnier	Francis Jean Mar	23/09/1902	Miliana	Algeria	M	GR16P428130			FFI
120	Mont	Fernand	02/12/1925	Saint-Charles	Algeria	M	GR16P428352	AC21P600473		FFI
121	Montoya	Arnoine	11/09/1923	Mascara	Algeria	M	GR16P428442			FFI
122	Montyori	Luten Louis	31/03/1914	Bone	Algeria	M	GR16P429040			FFI
123	Moraël	Pierre	10/07/1924	Cua-Ruo	Vietnam	M	GR16P428693			FFI

Conclusion:

My research addressed a key aim to contribute to the ongoing efforts of modern academics to offer commemoration and celebration of soldiers from the colonies, that up until this point had fallen by the wayside due to the selfish and outdated aims of various stakeholders in French Government and society. The identification of North Africans is paramount to rectifying the misdoings of the past and allowing the public to understand how the contributions of these men ensured their access to freedom and liberty. My research consisted of a long process of discovery and research, consulting archival files that had probably never been read before and allowing an accumulation of in-depth subject knowledge through my reading around the issue and visits to museums in Paris. My results coincided with other academic work that showed how the experience of Colonial soldiers was largely one of turbulence and having to prove their worth more than their white, French counterparts. It also recognised the individualism within a collective such as the FFI and sought to tell the stories of soldiers in a way that humanised them and connected them to reality rather than being distant figures of the past.

