

Maurice Pellé (Douai 1863 – Toulon 1924)



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Maurice Pellé was the second eldest son of the four children of Charles Pellé, a military officer, and Céline Bruneau, the daughter of a lawyer in Douai. The boy grew up in a bourgeois neighborhood of the city of Douai in northern France, where his father worked as an army unit commander. While his mother oversaw his strict moral and religious education, his father trained the boy in physical fitness and horse riding. However, Maurice, who had a rather delicate frame, gravitated instead to intellectual pursuits and the arts. He even attended a family art studio, where he devoted himself to painting, graphic arts and especially drawing. He spent his school years in various places depending on his father's assignment to military units. In Paris, Maurice attended the prestigious St. Stanislaus College.

Following in his father's footsteps, Maurice began his military career at an advanced technical school – the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris (1882). The school was very competitive, and students' results were regularly ranked. According to the preserved list of graduates, M. Pellé placed third in his class. In 1884, he commenced professional military training at the School of Applied Artillery, and later continued at the Riding Academy (1888–1889). In 1895, he completed his studies at the War College (École supérieure de guerre) with the rank of captain.

Pellé's professors as well as his superiors came to the conclusion that the young soldier would be most suitable for a position with the General Staff. And so it happened – after graduating from the Military Academy, Pellé joined the General Staff as an intern (1895–1896). Starting in 1900, Pellé became close with then Colonel Joseph Joffre, who selected him as his orderly officer and assigned him to a mission in Madagascar, where the two traveled together (1902–1903). Until 1908, Pellé gained the necessary experience as artillery commander, inspector of military schools, etc. With the rank of lieutenant colonel he was then sent on a diplomatic mission to Berlin as a military attaché (1909–1912). As a member of the French diplomatic corps, led by Ambassador Jules Cambon, Pellé was able to penetrate into influential circles of German statesmen and inform the French government and the military leadership about German economic and military policies. Thanks to his intervention, the French government responded to the German armaments policy by increasing the number of reserves to 3 years of permanent recruits in arms (only in 1913). For his diplomatic services Pellé was promoted to colonel. In 1913–1914, he was the supreme military commander in Morocco (after the Second Moroccan Crisis it became a French protectorate in 1912) and commander of Moroccan troops, with whom he later met again on the Western Front during WW1.

After the outbreak of the "Great War" in 1914, Pellé was called as Joffre's Deputy Chief of Staff in the command tent in Chantilly near Paris. He remained there until the French government purged the highest military ranks following an unsuccessful offensive at the Battle of Verdun in 1916. General Joffre was suspended and with him Pellé, his closest collaborator. In the spring of 1917, Pellé – at that point already a brigadier (since 1914) – experienced firsthand the taste of life at the front. The fact that Pellé was an able diplomat, strategist and commander in practice as well as theory is evidenced by his honors and promotion to the rank of Major General (provisionally

in May 1917) after his 153rd Division made a successful attack at the Chemin des Dames. Unfortunately, this spring offensive did not yield a complete victory, and the French were forced to withdraw back to their original position. Pellé's promotion went hand in hand with the increased responsibility placed on him: in the spring of 1918 (after Germany concluded a truce with Bolshevik Russia in Brest), the entire Western Front expected a dangerous German offensive. Pellé's Fifth Corps had to defend the passage to Paris. Thanks to his strategically flawless and courageous leadership, the French – strengthened by new and fresh soldiers – were prepared to counterattack.

Perhaps the most delicate and unpredictable task awaited Pellé at the turn of 1918 and 1919. The French Prime Minister Clemenceau, in cooperation with Marshall Foch, commissioned him to lead the French military mission in the newly formed Czechoslovakia. Right at the beginning, Pellé – already a Major General (1918) – had to deal with the conflict of interests of the French military mission (Gen. Pellé), the Italian military mission (Gen. Luigi Guiseppe Piccione), the Czechoslovak government (Minister Václav Klofáč) and the Supreme Command of Allied Forces (Marshal Ferdinand Foch) at the Czechoslovak territory. The unclear situation was resolved only after the departure of Italian officers from the Slovak territory and Romania's truce with Hungary raised the threat that the newly consolidated Hungarian troops would attack Slovakia (a former territory of Upper Hungary) in the spring of 1919. The Hungarians did indeed attack, occupying Košice, Prešov and other cities. Pellé, at the time the French Chief of General Staff, was appointed as commander of all Czechoslovak military forces by President Masaryk in order to liberate Slovakia from the hands of the enemy. Pellé had to deal with the domestic arsenal composed of Legionnaires, former officers of the Imperial and Royal Army, the Falcons (Sokols) and other conscripts, and to assemble a fighting army, all while strenuously persuading Marshall Foch about the necessity of Allied intervention. At the insistence of the Allied Forces, a ceasefire ultimatum was presented and following the agreement reached by Pellé (as a representative of Czechoslovakia) and the Hungarian government, the two armies withdrew to the borders defined by the Allied Forces. This intervention earned Pellé popularity among the Czechoslovak public, and President Masaryk awarded him the Czechoslovak War Cross on July 14, 1919.

With Pellé's position thus consolidated, he continued building a stable Czechoslovak army of officers with a fixed number of regularly renewed recruits. Pellé wanted to strengthen the alliance of France and Czechoslovakia, so the new nations would have a modern army available under the alliance system even outside its territory. He was equally attuned to Czechoslovakia's geographical and political limitations and the fact that the success of the newly formed state in the heart of Europe was heavily dependent on its allies, especially France. Thus he played an important role in creation of the Defense Act and the Military Academy in Hranice (both in 1920). At the time of a looming conflict between Czechoslovakia and Poland in the Teschen (Těšínsko) region (spring 1920), Pellé stood firmly behind Czechoslovak soldiers, even risking insubordination to his commander Foch (Poles too were members of the Allied Forces).

Pellé was also fond of Czechoslovakia for personal reasons – there he met Jarmila Braunerová, whom he married in 1921. A year later, their daughter Maryška was born. Pellé was also fascinated by Prague's intellectual and artistic life (F. Kupka, M. Švabinský, A. Mucha, F. Kafka, Z. Braunerová, etc.). When he was ordered to resign from his position in Czechoslovakia and take up the post of High Commissioner of the French Republic in Constantinople (1921), he wrote to his future wife that he was leaving Czechoslovakia reluctantly. On the day of his departure from

Czechoslovakia (January 1, 1921) he delivered a greeting to his troops in the Czech language and called Czechoslovakia his second homeland.

Pellé endured the peace negotiations with Turkey until the signing of the treaty in Lausanne, Switzerland. It seems that these exhausting peace talks cost him his life. Pellé died in a hospital in Toulon, France on March 16, 1924. Before that, President Masaryk was able to award him the White Lion Order (First Class). On the eve of his death, French President Gaston Doumergue awarded him the highest decoration of the Legion of Honor – the Grand Cross.

Pellé's career path and military ranks¹:

Year	French title	English equivalent
1884	Sous-Lieutenant	Lieutenant
1886	Lieutenant	First lieutenant
1892	Capitaine	Captain
1902	Commandant	Major
1908	Lieutenant-Colonel	Lieutenant Colonel
1911	Colonel	Colonel
1914	Général de brigade	Brigadier General
1917 (18)	Général de division	Major general

Military medals and awards (selection) awarded to Maurice Pellé during his life:

- Czechoslovak War Cross (1919): Czechoslovak War Cross 1914–1918 – established by decree by the Interim Government of the Czechoslovak Republic on November 7, 1918, in Paris; awarded by the Minister of War for personal bravery and other meritorious combat service achievements performed during World War I. Its author was the French sculptor Antoine Bourdelle.



Source: www.vyznamenani.net [10/8/2014].

¹ BŘACH, R. *Generál Maurice Pellé. První náčelník hlavního štábu*, Praha: MO ČR, 2007, p. 220.

- *Order of the White Lion* (1923): established by government decree from December 7, 1922; awarded by the President to foreign nationals for their meritorious service to the Czechoslovak State.



Source: www.vyznamenani.net [10/8/2014].

- All levels of the French Legion of Honour, the highest of which is the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour (Grand Croix de la Légion d' honneur, 1924): an honor established by a decree from March 30, 1805 and awarded by the President of the Republic.



Source: www.musee-legiondhonneur.fr [10/8/2014].

Pellé's legacy in collective memory:

- Pellé's Street and Pellé's Villa (Prague – Dejvice)
- Pellé's Villa in Dobřichovice on Gen. Pellé's Street (owned by the family of Jára Pellé-Braunerová; purchased by M. Pellé in 1921)
- Painting: *General Pellé* (author Viktor Stretti², 1920)
- Bust: *General Pellé*³
- Musical composition *Général Pellé Marche* (author Václav Vraný, 1919)

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² Viktor Stretti (1878–1957) – painter, graphic artist, illustrator, pedagogue; one of the founders of Czech graphic arts. Source: <http://www.langhans.cz/> [10/13/2014].

³ The daughter of Maurice Pellé - Maryška Pellé – commissioned the bust of General Pellé (the author was a Czech sculptor Bohumil Kafka) and donated it to the General Staff in Prague. In 2003, by way of the Military History Institute, she donated its copy to the Czech Embassy in Paris, where it has been located until today.